

*Netherlands American Studies Review*

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# Welcome

to the very first edition of the Netherlands American Studies Review, the new bi-annual student journal of the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA). In the last couple of years, we have searched for new ways to promote and celebrate student excellence in the field of North American Studies nationwide, including - but not limited to - history, politics, literature, and society. The result of this quest is lying in front of you: a journal filled with fantastic papers and book reviews that truly embody the outstanding quality of student work in our field.

In this Spring 2020 issue, you will find eleven carefully selected pieces that reflect on the topical diversity and interdisciplinarity of American Studies in the Netherlands. Our students cover a wide variety of issues, ranging from tax law to literature and from environmental skepticism to video games. These papers were written by students in different stages of their higher education, including Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD programs.

We are very thankful for all the students who have sent us their writings, for the editors who have worked tirelessly to select and finetune their papers, and, of course, for the NASA Board, which has supported us throughout the process. We are proud of the final product and hope it will inspire you as much as it did us.

We hope you will enjoy the Spring 2020 edition of the Netherlands American Studies Review!

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Editor-in-Chief

On behalf of the Editorial Board  
Heleen Blommers  
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## Beyond the Paris Accord: Tracing the Legacy of Climate Skepticism from Reagan to Trump

Sanne Kleijn | Leiden University

*This paper was written for the US Modern Foreign Policy Course  
in the MA program of International Relations*

Looking at President Trump's statements about global climate change, it seems to be clear that his administration has done its utmost best to prevent the creation of new environmental regulations. The most prominent example that shows his determination was the announcement that the US would no longer participate in the Paris Accord by 2020. Although Trump's determination to fight against environmental regulations might seem radical compared to former President Obama's policies, Trump's actions very much align with those of former Republican presidents.<sup>1</sup> In fact, many researchers claim that there is a long American tradition of skepticism towards climate change and regulations that should prevent its consequences. This tradition began in the late 1970s and remains active in American society. The question that arises is why the United States has been skeptical of international climate change agreements since the 1970s.

This paper aims to answer this question by analyzing the history of environmental skepticism in the US. The first part will investigate how the counter-environmental movement came about in the 1970s and how it gained significance during the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan. The second part will look at how this movement developed itself further during the different presidential administrations. This part will also look at the impact of the movement on the attitude of the US government on international climate agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Accord. In the conclusion, it will become clear that the partisanship of the electoral parties and the influential conservative think tanks highly contributed to the skeptical attitude of the US towards climate agreements.

### **The Rise of American Climate Skepticism**

The roots of environmental skepticism can be traced back to the 1960s, when various progressive movements raised awareness for issues such as the Vietnam war, civil rights and, climate change. The environmentalist movement also achieved multiple successes in the US during this period. The establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970, an agency that has to ensure that new laws related to environmental issues are enforced, and the introduction of the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts are good examples of the accomplishments of the environmentalists in this period.<sup>2</sup> Referring to the introduction of these environmental regulations, scholars often mention that the US was a true pioneer in advocating the importance of international environmental protection.<sup>3</sup> The US government had been actively involved in the creation and development of the United Nations Environmental Program and ratified multiple international agreements that aimed to promote environmental protection on a global scale.<sup>4</sup>

However, many Americans who had long benefitted from the former status quo felt that their material interests were threatened by the progressive changes in society. This fear stimulated the establishment of multiple conservative counter-movements.<sup>5</sup> Members of the anti-environmental movement were often people from the industry and business communities, as these sectors were most challenged by the progressive environmental movement.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the early 1980s that the counter-environmentalist movement got a real political voice, as a result of the electoral victory of the conservative president Ronald Reagan. Reagan advocated for conservative policy change and economic revitalizations and therefore launched a political attack on former economic and regulatory policies that were influenced by the environmentalist movement.<sup>7</sup> It can be argued that Reagan was indeed quite successful in weakening the political influence of the environmentalist movement. Therefore, many researchers speak about a new era in federal environmental regulations.<sup>8</sup> So, what did Reagan do differently from his predecessors?

Firstly, Reagan openly questioned the validity of the arguments that were proposed by environmentalists, even though there was wide support for those among the American public. For example, he often mentioned that the former environmental regulations were a burden for the national economy.<sup>9</sup> But he went further than just saying that he wanted to change those regulations. The key to Reagan's strategy was to weaken the political influence of the environmentalist movement through the appointment of loyal and committed officials that felt aligned with his conservative ideology.<sup>10</sup> One example of this was James G. Watt, who became the Secretary of the Department of the Interior. Watt introduced substantial budgetary cuts for the Environmental Protection Agency, which weakened the ability of the agency to do research and enforce environmental laws.<sup>11</sup> Many new officials were appointed for their 'ideological purity' rather than their professional background to make sure that the presidential agenda would be executed.<sup>12</sup> Experienced progressive and moderate environmentalists consequently largely disappeared out of government positions.

Besides appointing loyal policy officials, Reagan's administration also reorganized and curtailed the executive departments that were responsible for environmental policy, in order to facilitate presidential control over policy change and implement only those changes that promoted the president's policy agenda.<sup>13</sup> Reagan also expanded initiatives to review regulatory proposals for cost and economic impact to hinder the forthcoming of new regulations.<sup>14</sup> As a result, new regulations could only come about if the potential benefits outweighed the costs, which logically had major implications for environmental and health regulations. Finally, it is also argued that Reagan's administration consciously withheld information about the policymaking from the public, which curtailed fair citizen participation in administrative actions.<sup>15</sup> On an international level, the Reagan administration reversed American leadership in the struggle against global climate change. His administration refused to sign a new version of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, while the US government had actively promoted the creation and further development of this progressive initiative only a few years earlier. Additionally, Reagan drastically reduced the American financial contribution to the UN Environmental Program.<sup>16</sup> He argued that the US had to withdraw from these UN projects because they were unfavorable for the American economy while countries that were hostile to the US could benefit from them

An important consequence of Reagan's rule was that environmental policy became a very polarizing issue within American society. Whereas the Republican and Democratic Parties did not

collide much on environmental issues in the 1960s and 1970s, this changed during Reagan's administration. Through the appointing of pure anti-environmental officials in his government, Reagan abandoned the former moderate Republican policy agenda on environmental issues and replaced it by a more aggressive and narrow ideology on how environmental policy should look.<sup>17</sup> While the Republican Party had to defend Reagan's anti-environmental ideology, many environmentalists started to align themselves with the Democratic Party.<sup>18</sup> As a result, a polarized view on what the US environmental policy should look like became a part of the ideological identity of both parties in an opportunistic attempt to attract public support. In the academic literature, there seems to be a broad consensus among scholars that Reagan's administration made environmental politics a deeply partisan issue.<sup>19</sup> And this partisanship has increased over the years as pro-environment voting by republicans in Congress has been declining consistently since 1990.<sup>20</sup>

But there was another important consequence of Reagan's administration period: he significantly reduced the effectiveness of environmental agencies. Yet, his efforts to weaken environmental regulations strengthened public support for environmentalism, as scientific research convincingly showed that the threats of climate change should not be ignored. As a result of successful environmental research, interest in world environmental affairs grew during Reagan's administration and would continue to do so after.<sup>21</sup> The counter-environmental movement, therefore, developed a tactic at the end of the 1980s that was focused on questioning environmental science.

While for a long time, environmental skepticism did not receive a lot of attention, most scholars seem to agree that the effectiveness of the counter-movement is the reason why the US has rejected many environmental regulations, both domestically and internationally.<sup>22</sup> So, what do scholars mean with 'environmental skepticism,' and why has it been so effective in preventing the ratifications of environmental regulations?

Many people would associate environmental skepticism with a desperate attempt of the cooperate community to retain the primacy of capitalism by denying the scientific consensus on climate change. This common idea, however, needs some nuance. Researcher Eloise Harding, for example, argues that the advocates of environmental skepticism are not simply all denying the existence of climate change as there are significant differences within this movement.<sup>23</sup> She uses the work of Bjørn Lomborg to show that skeptics not necessarily all deny climate change or ignore the scientific facts by using a populist approach. Lomborg noted that climate change is indeed a problem, but not an urgent one.<sup>24</sup> This paper agrees that Harding's definition of environmental skepticism might be a very accurate one: "A catch-all for a wide spectrum ranging from a mild distrust of environmentalists coupled with a high level of optimism regarding humans' ability to solve problems through outright denial of these problems."<sup>25</sup> While there might be some differences of opinion within the group of advocates of environmental skepticism, most scholars agree that the movement is very united through its broad ideology. While the first counter-movement was part of the general conservative movement in the 1970s, the latter environmental skeptics have developed a more specific political movement that also borrows its arguments from economic liberalism and right-wing libertarianism.<sup>26</sup> Because of its ideology, the counter-movement has established a loose coalition of conservative think tanks, the fossil fuels industry, contrarian scientists, conservative politicians, and conservative media who together form the 'denial machine.'<sup>27</sup>

Besides their unity through ideology, the movement is also united through its effective strategy, which is focused on undermining environmental science through skepticism. As skepticism is an inherent feature of science in general, the use of skepticism indeed seems to be an appropriate way to counter-act the strongest defense of environmentalists. The most important consequence of this method is that it helps anti-environmentalists to establish themselves as a 'counter-intelligentsia' which offers an alternative, but legitimate view on environmental issues.<sup>28</sup> Another consequence is that it gives the impression to the American public that the community of climate 'scientists' has not achieved a consensus about the existence of global warming, while, in actuality, this has been the case for a long time.<sup>29</sup> In general, it could be said that skeptics play into the complexity of the nature of human-caused global warming and the high level of uncertainty of what risks it poses for the national security of states.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it is often mentioned that scientists have too little empirical evidence to prove what the exact consequence of climate change will be, which makes it hard to convince policymakers of the priority of the problem.<sup>31</sup> Skeptics aim to increase this complexity and uncertainty in order to undermine the trust in environmental science and thus the usefulness of environmental regulations.

Researchers Peter Jacques, Riley Dunlap, and Mark Freeman go further into clarifying what the strategy looks like through arguing that it consists out of four returning themes.<sup>32</sup> The first theme would be the rejection of scientific literature on environmental problems such as global warming. Many skeptics indeed argue that global warming is exaggerated as a result of political agendas.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, skeptics disregard the priority of environmental policies in relation to other national security threats. Some skeptics have argued that by adding climate change to the national security agenda, the problem might be handled in inappropriate ways and might take away attention from other important issues.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, as scientists have too little empirical evidence to prove when and what consequence of climate change will occur, it is hard to understand for policymakers what can be done on a short-term notice.<sup>35</sup> The third theme is holding on to an anti-regulatory/anti-corporate liability position, as it is often argued that former regulations are based on incorrect science.<sup>36</sup> The last theme is that skeptics often argue that environmental regulations might hurt the American economy and progress, as was indeed often mentioned by Reagan himself.

### **The Development of Environmental Skepticism After the Reagan Era**

As mentioned previously, the significance of environmentalism would only further increase after Reagan's administration due to the growing importance of international discussions about climate change. In the 1990s, it became clear that the environmentalist movement had become a global one as a result of several important phenomena. With the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, the UN stated that climate change was a global problem that deserved to be a priority on the international political agenda. The IPCC was responsible for investigating and reporting scientific evidence on climate change and possible international responses to this. In 1990 the IPCC would bring out a significant report that concluded that human activities substantially contributed to the increasing amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, resulting in global warming. This report would again lead to the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, where 108 heads of state came together to address the problem of anthropogenic climate change.



However, while the significance of environmentalism increased, the influence of the counter-environmentalists movement grew as well. From 1989 onwards, many industry-funded think tanks started to publish ‘expert’ reports in order to challenge environmental scientists. The main argument used in these reports was that scientific research was too uncertain to justify government interventions on environmental protections.<sup>37</sup> The Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the George C. Marshall Institute are prominent examples of such American think tanks. Interestingly, researchers Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway refer to this method as ‘the tobacco strategy,’ as it was also used by think tanks to cast doubt about non-environmental related health problems such as smoking.<sup>38</sup> Research done in 2016 has, in fact, shown that more than 90 percent of all skeptical papers on climate change had strong ties with self-proclaimed conservative think tanks.<sup>39</sup> It is plausible that these skeptical reports contributed to a decline of support for climate regulations both on a public and on a political level. While most media wrote about arguments made by environmental scientists and data they produced in 1988, in the early 1990s this popular subject was replaced by the discussion of environmental politics and the controversy surrounding it.<sup>40</sup> As a result of this confusion, American citizens would have become warier of environmental regulations.

When looking at the environmental policy of Reagan’s successor President George H.W. Bush, it is clear that the anti-regulation lobby influenced American politics as well. While Bush did not openly reject the importance of an international climate agreement, he was certainly not an advocate for environmental regulations either. An example that reflects this attitude is the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which had come out of the Earth Summit in Brazil. Just like 191 other heads of state, Bush would sign this framework. By doing this, he could say that he supported the environmental movement and considered the necessary environmental regulations. The truth is, however, that the framework he signed did not set clear limits, making it easy for Bush to not act upon it.<sup>41</sup> According to researcher Jean-Daniel Collomb, Bush used this ambivalent approach to keep both his anti-environmental Republican Party and the popular environmental movement satisfied.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the perceived international success of the environmentalists triggered the conservative movement to further develop their opposition tactics.

During the two administrations under President Bill Clinton, both environmental and anti-environmental movements became more significant. Due to the successful Earth Summit and the UN framework, other IPCC reports and international agreements would follow. In December 1997, a conference was held in Kyoto in which more than 160 nations came together to talk again about common solutions for reducing the emission of greenhouse gasses. This would lead to the development of the Kyoto Protocol: an international agreement that proposed that all industrial countries had to reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses with 5.2 percent between 2008 and 2012 relative to 1990. According to national polls in 1998, it seemed like a large majority of the American population agreed on the idea that global warming was a real problem that required action.<sup>43</sup> However, the US Senate would unanimously pass a resolution that made it unable for the Clinton administration to ratify any international treaty that would force greenhouse gas emission reduction for the US without also imposing such reductions for developing countries.<sup>44</sup>

One potential reason for this resolution was that conservative think tanks had put enormous effort into advertising their skeptical arguments on television programs, radio advertisements, conferences, and their presence on congressional hearings in the 1990s.<sup>45</sup> Another reason concerns



the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, which contributed to the success of the counter-environmental movement. As the Republican Party advocated an anti-environmental view, their increased presence gave a strong voice to the anti-global warming campaign in congressional hearings and the national media.<sup>46</sup>

When George W. Bush became president in 2000, the US would officially withdraw from the protocol negotiations, which fitted into his Republican profile.<sup>47</sup> The arguments that the Bush administration made were quite in line with those of the many conservative think tanks. In a public speech, Bush claimed that there was no conclusive scientific consensus on global warming yet, which made enforcing environmental regulations seem like a big and unnecessary risk for the American economy.<sup>48</sup> Looking back at Bush's environmental legacy, it seems obvious that his administration actively supported the anti-environmental movement. He reduced the effectiveness of the Environmental Protection Agency, gave permission to oil and gas companies to drill in new areas, and has been of withholding scientific data from the public about global warming.<sup>49</sup> During Bush's presidency, it became clear that the environmental skepticism movement had also affected the American public. According to a poll conducted by Time magazine in 2006, only 56 percent of the Americans thought that average global temperatures had risen.<sup>50</sup> And another poll done by ABC News mentioned that 64 percent of Americans believed that there was a lot of disagreement among scientists about global warming.<sup>51</sup>

During Obama's administration, a lot was done by the US government both domestically and internationally to reduce climate change effects. Obama put into place multiple national policies to show that American leadership in the struggle against global climate change was re-established.<sup>52</sup> A good example of these policies is that he included climate change as a threat to his national security strategy. When the US signed the Paris Accord in 2015, it seemed for a while that the environmental skepticism movement had become less influential on climate policymaking. Just as the Kyoto protocol, the agreement aimed to limit the increase of global warming predominantly by reducing greenhouse emissions. But in order to bypass the former resolution of the Senate, an amendment was implemented that said that developing countries were responsible for a reduction of greenhouse emissions as well. Furthermore, Obama promised that the US had to contribute 3 billion dollars to the Green Climate Fund, a UN financial mechanism established to help developing countries to counter climate change.<sup>53</sup>

However, as soon as Donald Trump was elected president, it became clear that Obama's hard work would be reversed. Long before he started his presidential campaign, Trump was clear about his idea that climate change was a hoax created by China to weaken American competitiveness.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it was no surprise that Trump promised to withdraw the US from the Paris Accord if he was elected. He argued that the Accord was doomed to fail, would undermine the American economy, and was unfair to the US because of the competitive advantage of countries like China and India.<sup>55</sup> This argument closely aligned with those that the export reports of the conservative think tanks had made directly after Obama had signed the Paris Accord. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, for example, wrote a report in which it was claimed that the Accord was a treaty even though Obama had said it was not, this to bypass the Senate.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, it claimed that if the Accord would be ratified, this would mean that the US would reduce its capacity

for self-government.<sup>57</sup> Other arguments were that the Accord was too weak to make a real change or that it was very questionable to what extent China and India would act upon it.<sup>58</sup>

So far, it seems that Trump has been quite radical in implementing his anti-environmental ideology. The administration has removed climate change from its national security strategy and reversed many of Obama's former environment-related policies. But when we compare Trump's policy with those of the other Republican presidents since Ronald Reagan, it seems like he is not that radical after all.

The American anti-environmentalist movement has always been an influential one. When climate issues were raised in the 1960s and 1970s, many Americans felt united in their fear that environmental regulations would badly hurt their interests. However, it was not until the election of the conservative president Reagan that the movement got what it wanted. President Reagan actively intervened in the process of climate policymaking and, therefore, significantly weakened the political influence of environmental regulations. Meanwhile, Reagan's methods divided American society into two opposite groups. While the Republican Party members became more radical supporters of conservative liberal objections to environmental regulations, the Democratic Party started to align itself more with the neglected environmentalists. Moreover, his methods could not prevent the growing international significance of environmentalism, as a result of the extensive use of science. In order to counter the broad public support for environmentalism, the opponents had to use a new strategy to convince the American society of its aims.

This new strategy involved environmental skepticism. By challenging the weaknesses of environmental science, for example, its complexity and uncertainty about the future, skeptics try to undermine the strong position of environmentalism and offer their alternative view on climate regulations. Often mentioned arguments are that scientific claims about climate change are exaggerated or not developed well enough, making it a significant and perhaps unnecessary risk to implement strict environmental regulations. While there has been a consensus among environmental scientists that climate change is a real threat, skeptical literature and media have created the impression that it is not. This success is the result of its powerful coalition, which is united by a broad ideology. This coalition consists of influential conservative think tanks and contrary scientists that are often supported by the Republican Party and the public media. As such, the Republican presidents since 1982 have been very much influenced by skeptical arguments about international climate agreements. Although democratic presidents such as Clinton and Obama were far more supportive of international agreements, they could not ignore or undermine the strong voices of their political opponents.

Looking at the history of the counter-environmental movement and their strategies helps to understand the omnipresent skepticism of the American government about both domestic and international climate agreements. Furthermore, its legacy gives the impression that it could continue to succeed in the future.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jean-Daniel Collomb, “A Worthy Heir: Donald Trump, the Republican Party and Climate Change,” *Lisa e-Journal* XVI, no. 2 (September 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> Collomb, “A Worthy Heir.”
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- <sup>9</sup> Riley M. Dunlap and Aaron M. McRight, “Defeating Kyoto: the Conservative Movement's Impact on U.S. Climate Change Policy,” *Social Problems* 50, no. 3 (2003): 348.
- <sup>10</sup> Hays, *Beauty, health and permanence*, 493.
- <sup>11</sup> Kraft and Vig, “Environmental Policy in the Reagan Presidency,” 426.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.
- <sup>15</sup> Hays, *Beauty, Health and Permanence*, 498.
- <sup>16</sup> Collomb “A Worthy Heir.”
- <sup>17</sup> Kraft and Vig, “Environmental Policy in the Reagan Presidency,” 423.
- <sup>18</sup> Collomb “A Worthy Heir.”
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- <sup>20</sup> Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman, “The Organization of Denial,” 350.
- <sup>21</sup> Hays, *Beauty, Health and Permanence*, 511.
- <sup>22</sup> Riley M. Dunlap, “Climate Change Skepticism and Denial: An Introduction,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 6 (2013): 692; Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman, “The Organization of Denial,” 351.
- <sup>23</sup> Eloise Harding, “A Conceptual Morphology of Environmental Skepticism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 24, no. 3 (2019): 297.
- <sup>24</sup> Bjørn Lomborg, “Forget the Scary Eco-Crunch: This Earth is Enough,” *The Globe and Mail* (April 2009): 119, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/forget-the-scary-eco-crunch-this-earth-is-enough/article4304957/>
- <sup>25</sup> Harding, “A Conceptual Morphology,” 297.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.
- <sup>27</sup> Dunlap, “Climate Change Skepticism and Denial,” 693.
- <sup>28</sup> Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman, “The Organization of Denial,” 356.
- <sup>29</sup> Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 169.
- <sup>30</sup> Dunlap, “Climate Change Skepticism and Denial,” 692.
- <sup>31</sup> Joshua W. Bushby, “Who Cares about the Weather?: Climate Change and U.S. National Security,” *Security Studies* 17, no. 3 (2008): 470.
- <sup>32</sup> Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman, “The Organization of Denial,” 353.
- <sup>33</sup> See for example Patrick Michaels, *Meltdown: The Predictable Distortion of Global Warming by Scientists, Politicians, and the Media* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute 2004), 5.
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- <sup>35</sup> Busby, “Who Cares about the Weather?”, 470.
- <sup>36</sup> Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman, “The Organization of Denial,” 354.
- <sup>37</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 171.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>39</sup> Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman, “The Organization of Denial,” 360.
- <sup>40</sup> Lee Wilkins and Philip Patterson, “Science as Symbol: the Media Chills the Greenhouse Effect,” in *Risky Business: Communicating Issues of Science, Risk and Public Policy*, ed. Lee Wilkins and Philip Patterson (New York: Greenwood, 1991), 159-76.
- <sup>41</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 197.
- <sup>42</sup> Collomb, “A Worthy Heir.”
- <sup>43</sup> McRight and Dunlap, “Defeating Kyoto,” 349.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>46</sup> Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman, "The Organization of Denial," 349.

<sup>47</sup> Collomb, "A Worthy Heir."

<sup>48</sup> George W. Bush, "President Bush's Response to Global Warming-Transcript." *PBS NewsHour*, June 11, 2001.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/president-bushs-response-to-global-warming>.

<sup>49</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, "The Worst of Times: Bush's Environmental Legacy Examined," *The Guardian*, January 16, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 169.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Majid Asadnabizadeh, "Climate Change in the Foreign Policy of the Trump Administration," *Environmental Policy and Law* 49, no. 2-3 (2019): 196.

<sup>53</sup> Asadnabizadeh, "Climate Change in the Foreign Policy of the Trump Administration," 197.

<sup>54</sup> Alan Yuhas, "Presidential Debate Fact-check: Trump and Clinton's Claims Reviewed," *The Guardian*, September 27, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/26/debate-fact-check-trump-clinton-live-quotes-hofstra>.

<sup>55</sup> Donald Trump, "Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord." *The White House*, June 1, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/>

<sup>56</sup> Marlo Jr. Lewis, "The Paris Climate Agreement is a Treaty Requiring Senate Review," *Competitive Enterprise Institute* no. 213 (February 2016).

<sup>57</sup> Lewis, "The Paris Climate Agreement."

<sup>58</sup> Collomb, "A Worthy Heir."

## Dutch Bellamyism and the Legacy of *Looking Backward*

Melle van Dammen | University of Amsterdam

*This paper was written for the course America Inside Out: International Perspectives on the United States in the Research MA in History*

In 1888, Edward Bellamy, a New England journalist who had previously failed to gain attention with several underwhelming novels, suddenly became a best-selling author with his utopian novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. Within a year, 200,000 copies were sold, and the novel went on to become the third bestselling American book of the nineteenth century, with only *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ben Hur* outselling it.<sup>1</sup> The book tells the story of the wealthy Bostonian Jullian West, who is put into a hypnotic sleep in the late nineteenth century and awakens in the year 2000 to find himself in a radically changed society. Julian is amazed to discover that the capitalist system that had treated him quite well in the past is completely gone. By 2000, all industries have been nationalized and labor is organized in an 'industrial army.' All men and women work for the nation, which is more or less compulsory until the age of forty-five, after which the workers "have the residue of life for the pursuit of their own improvement or recreation."<sup>2</sup> Working hours are short, everyone happily contributes to the prosperity of the nation, and the implementation of a 'credit card' system ensures that no one can accumulate more wealth than his neighbor. Bellamy shows us a socialist utopia, one might say, but he carefully avoids using the word socialism.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Leete, the long-winded didactic who guides Julian through this shockingly new world, instead talks about the "national organization of labor," "national force of workers," "national industries" and even "the national party."<sup>4</sup> Couldn't we just replace 'national' with 'socialist' and still read the same novel?

In 1962, Sylvia Bowman certainly made Bellamy look like a Marxist wolf in sheep's clothing in her edited volume *Edward Bellamy Abroad: An American Prophet's Influence*, a pioneering study of the global spread of Bellamy's ideology. It is, to this day, the only large-scale transnational investigation of Bellamyism. From inspiring the Russian revolution to igniting the Fabians in England, Bowman showed how Bellamy influenced early socialists around the world. She portrayed him as an essentially socialist thinker, who had to be somewhat covert in a conservative America: "*Looking Backward*, though it was attacked, sold in the United States 400,000 copies from 1888 to 1897 – the period in which the ideas of socialists and philosophical anarchists were an anathema because of the 'red scare' resulting from the Haymarket Riot."<sup>5</sup> And she goes on to say: "In this period, in which 'a man who talked or wrote socialism was in danger of being run into a corner and clubbed,' people discussed and often sponsored Nationalism because they did not know they were concerning themselves with socialistic principles."<sup>6</sup> Bowman, who described herself as the "world authority on Bellamy," was quite enamored with the nineteenth century utopian.<sup>7</sup> She ended her book wishfully: "By the year 2000, Bellamy may indeed be recognized as The Great American Prophet (the appellation Dewey gave him) and the author of a novel which was, in fact, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of capitalism."<sup>8</sup> As it turns out, this really was just wishful thinking.

Other scholars, who kept more distance from their subject, have stressed the differences between Bellamy's nationalism and Marxist socialism. The obvious distinction being that Bellamy's utopia was supposed to come about through evolution, not revolution. Furthermore, the world of *Looking Backward* is rather undemocratic. The nation is led by the head of the industrial army, which Dr Leete explained thusly: "It is easier for a general up in a balloon, with perfect survey of the field, to maneuver a million men to victory than for a sergeant to manage a platoon in a thicket."<sup>9</sup> Sociologist Arthur Lipow has taken this to mean that Bellamy's utopia was an authoritarian kind of socialism, which he contrasts with any kind of mass working-class movement. For Lipow, *Looking Backward* is not informed by the moral superiority of the working class, but by a fear of them.<sup>10</sup> Bellamy represented the crisis of the old middle class, caught in the middle of capitalism. While the new capitalists endangered the social independence of the declining middle class, the growing working class caused them anxiety over possible revolution. Beleaguered from both sides, the middle class found some reassurance in *Looking Backward*. It portrayed a world without violent revolution, class conflict, or the injustices of capitalism. Viewed this way, Bellamy's utopia is a middle-class fantasy where the unruly workers are governed with military discipline by an authoritarian elite. Lipow's reading of Bellamy is very cynical, especially when contrasted with the admiration and optimism we found in Bowman's work. Lipow's account is more appealing in the sense that it successfully explains why such a dull, didactic book would have had such allure at the time. But his cynicism goes quite far, as Lipow eventually comes to describe Bellamy as a forefather of repressive Stalinism, fascism, and Nazism.<sup>11</sup>

With Bowman and Lipow we have two highly contradictory interpretations of Bellamy: for one, he helped inspire social democracy, for the other, he was an architect of fascism. They certainly cannot agree on Bellamy's afterlife in America itself. For Bowman, Bellamy's eventual alliance with the farmers of the Populist movement proves his essentially socialist character.<sup>12</sup> Lipow, on the other hand, simply discards this fact by saying that the farmers did not understand Bellamy's true, tyrannical nature: "Its manifestly authoritarian character could be ignored or not fully grasped as people were carried away by the contrast between the dark present and the bright future."<sup>13</sup> To make sense of this conflict, we might look at the Bellamy movement in another country and study how his ideas were received and used there. Where better to look than in the Netherlands, where the afterlife of Bellamy's ideas has arguably been the longest.<sup>14</sup>

Bellamy's utopia garnered the attention of the Dutch public at three different moments. The first time was immediately after *Looking Backward* was published, when the *Tachtigers*, a movement of radical literary figures, discussed the novel extensively. Then, in 1932 the *Internationale Vereniging Bellamy* (IVB) was organized, which successfully promoted his ideas until the Second World War. Finally, in 1945 the *Nederlandsche Bellamy Partij* was founded, which unsuccessfully tried to get Bellamyists voted into parliament. Out of these three moments, only the IVB has thus far received any substantial scholarly attention.<sup>15</sup>

The Dutch reception of *Looking Backward* began in 1890, when the first Dutch translation appeared: *In het Jaar 2000* was translated by Frank van der Goes.<sup>16</sup> Five years earlier, Van der Goes had helped found the progressive literary journal *De Nieuwe Gids*. This journal was the outlet for the *Tachtigers*, a generation of writers influenced by Impressionist art and Naturalist writers. It



featured their avant-garde writing, as well as many radical political essays. Van der Goes took it upon himself to translate Bellamy's novel into Dutch, sparking a debate in *De Nieuwe Gids*. In the journal, he went on to defend the novel as an important piece of socialist literature.<sup>17</sup> He called Bellamy's utopia a "very pure prophecy of the future" and a "spectacle of sophistication."<sup>18</sup> He felt that Bellamy's political economy, especially the credit system, was an enrichment to socialist theory. Eventually, though, Van der Goes would come to prefer Marxism: in 1894 he was one of the founders of the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij (SDAP), the biggest socialist party in the Netherlands until the Second World War, after which it merged into the Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA). Henri Polak, another founding member of the SDAP, was also influenced by Bellamy. Polak was an early socialist and trade unionist. In 1894 he founded the *Algemene Nederlandse Diamantbewerkers Bond*, an influential labor union focused on attaining better working conditions for diamond workers. Polak would remain president of the union until it was disbanded by the German occupiers in 1940. But Polak was also a Bellamy enthusiast, and was responsible for publishing its second Dutch translation in 1930.<sup>19</sup> In Van der Goes and Polak we find two prominent politicians who shaped Dutch social democracy and who were affected by *Looking Backward*.

Some of the writers in *De Nieuwe Gids*, however, showed less admiration for Bellamy. Allard Pierson, the prominent Amsterdam historian, felt some sympathy for the morals in *Looking Backward* and thought the utopia might very well be realized.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, he felt Bellamy's system was not innovative or thorough enough when compared to other socialist writings. Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, one of the founding fathers of Dutch socialism, was even less impressed with Bellamy.<sup>21</sup> He compared Bellamy to William Booth and Henry George, saying that all three were able to briefly capture the imagination of the socialists, but none of them would have any lasting influence. Renowned novelist Lodewijk van Deysel was the strongest opposer of *Looking Backward*.<sup>22</sup> He was not interested in its politics, and extremely critical of the book's aesthetics. Van Deysel wrote, in response to Van der Goes's translation: "I believe I have never read a book that filled me with such uttermost abhorrent disgust, such sour and bitter antipathy as your translation of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*."<sup>23</sup> Van Deysel felt that Bellamy had proven once and for all that socialism and literature should never be combined. Perhaps the most poignant observation was made by Frederik van Eeden, a writer and psychotherapist. He felt that *Looking Backward* failed as a utopian novel for the simple reason that he could not imagine anyone actually wanting to live in the world it portrayed.<sup>24</sup> In his 1890 book *Studies* he wrote about Bellamy: "His new world, a hundred years into the future, is impossibly perfect, impossibly good and impossibly dull."<sup>25</sup> Van Eeden would eventually be charmed by another American novel: *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. In 1898 he started a socialist community based on the book, outside of Bussum.<sup>26</sup>

As the Tachtigers moved on, Bellamy was momentarily forgotten in the Netherlands. That is, until an unlikely revival took place in the early 1930s. When the global economic depression started affecting the Netherlands, and unemployment rates were growing, people harked back to Bellamy's ideas.<sup>27</sup> Some idealists felt that the Great Depression showed the failure of capitalism and proved Bellamy to be right. Subsequently, in 1932 the Internationale Vereniging Bellamy was established in The Hague. Founders P. J. Burgers and M. H. Van der Stijl were both accountants for Studebaker Motors. The IVB was, remarkably, a strictly non-political organization. They were careful to avoid being associated with socialism and rejected the idea of class conflict. They also

stayed far away from the party-political game, promoting Bellamyism instead through publications and lectures. The IVB grew steadily throughout the 1930s. At the end of the decade, they had 10.000 members and over a hundred local Bellamy clubs. However, at the height of the association's success, the Netherlands was invaded by Nazi Germany. Leftist organizations like the SDAP were immediately banned by the German occupation.<sup>28</sup> But the non-political character of the IVB was accepted by the Germans, who miraculously allowed them to continue their activities in the beginning. While the IVB continued its meetings during the first year of the occupation, it was banned in March of 1941 anyway. The library and archive of president De Schepper were destroyed. Mr. Gertenbach, the printer of Bellamy propaganda, was executed by firing squad. The Cohen Brothers, the Jewish publishers of the Bellamy translations, died in extermination camps.

While the IVB was revived after the Second World War, it would never regain the success it had attained in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> Yet, there was another final attempt at Bellamyism in the Netherlands. On May 30th, 1945 – when the Netherlands had only been liberated from Nazi occupation for less than a month – the Nederlandsche Bellamy Partij (NBP) was founded in Groningen.<sup>30</sup> It sought to establish a socialist state in the Netherlands based on Bellamy's prophecy.<sup>31</sup> This was a break with both Bellamy himself and the IVB, who had carefully avoided calling themselves socialists. The founders of the NBP were former IVB members, who felt more concrete action was needed. They started out preparing for the parliamentary elections that would be held in May 1946. The NBP printed a monthly publication called *Welvaart voor Allen* and started spreading propaganda pamphlets. Public assemblies were organized in Utrecht and Rotterdam.<sup>32</sup> Their program was economically socialist but also included pacifist and feminist rhetoric. They called for equal opportunities for women, sovereignty for the Dutch overseas territories, and gradual nationalization of the means of production. They positioned themselves between the PvdA, which had essentially come to embrace capitalism, and the Communist Party, which supported Stalinism. They hoped to appeal to a middle ground of socialists, who still believed in abandoning capitalism, but did not support the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union. In the end, the results of the election were quite disappointing. The NBP received some 11.000 votes.<sup>33</sup> It would have required 32.000 votes for a seat in parliament. The party was eventually disbanded in 1948.<sup>34</sup> Remarkably though, through a series of fusions with other parties, it is an institutional forefather of current leftist party GroenLinks.<sup>35</sup>

On February 11th, 1953 a review of a recent publication appeared in *Het Parool*, a liberal Amsterdam newspaper. The book in question was an overview of social democratic literature from the past century, printed by socialist publishing company De Arbeiderspers, called *Socialistische documenten uit de literatuur van meer dan een eeuw*. The review was written by Jacques de Kadt, a prominent politician, former member of the Communist Party and at the time member of parliament for the PvdA. De Kadt complained that the book devoted more than twenty pages to *The Communist Manifesto* but made no mention of Bellamy. He said: "With all due respect for *The Manifesto*, but how could they forget that Bellamy's *Looking Backward* probably has had as big an impact on the ideation of the socialist masses in the Netherlands as Marx or Lassalle?"<sup>36</sup> It is quite telling that De Kadt, one of the most prominent Dutch socialists of the mid-twentieth century, held Bellamy in such high regard. Importantly, he claimed that Bellamy influenced the Dutch 'socialist masses,' making no reference to him as a middle-class intellectual.

The reception of Bellamy in the Netherlands offers some affirmation for Bowman's positive interpretation of *Looking Backward*, as there appear to be some important ties between Bellamy and Dutch social democracy. All of the writers of *The Nieuwe Gids* discussed Bellamy as a socialist writer. That Van der Goes and Polak, two of the founders of the SDAP, were advocates of Bellamy also supports Bowman's thesis that Bellamy influenced social-democratic movements. But other intellectuals, like Van Eeden and Van Deysse, were quick to point out how dull and devoid of meaning the world of *Looking Backward* was. Ultimately, all of them would come to prefer Marx – or Thoreau, in the case of Van Eeden. In the 1930s, Bellamyism was revived in the form of the Internationale Vereniging Bellamy. The fact that the IVB refused to associate itself with socialism and never got involved with the democratic process lines up with Lipow's cynical interpretation of Bellamy. But when confronted with Nazism, a truly authoritarian regime, the IVB was quickly destroyed. Finally, the Nederlandsche Bellamy Partij showed that Bellamy's ideas really could function as a social-democratic platform. But the influence of Bellamy was quite subtle. De Kadet's claim that Bellamy was as important to Dutch socialism as Marx had been, seems hardly believable.

*Looking Backward* was, in the end, a rather conservative middle-class fantasy that was never able to find broad support among the working classes. The NBP's poor election results are the clearest evidence of Bellamy's limited appeal. Lipow may have been quite right in calling Bellamyism a soulless and authoritarian take on socialism. But Lipow, a 1980s leftist disillusioned with Soviet communism, went too far when he made Bellamy ancestral to twentieth-century totalitarianism. Bellamy certainly imagined an authoritarian society, but the link to fascism is quite a big step.<sup>37</sup> As the book describes him, Dr. Leete was a pedantic bore, an annoying know-it-all, but no Goebbels.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Hoornweg, *De Internationale Vereniging Bellamy 1932-1982. Ideologie en mobilisatie van een utopische sociale beweging* (PhD diss., Erasmus University Rotterdam, 1988), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1996), 92.

<sup>3</sup> It is in fact used exactly once in the whole book, when Julian is still in his own nineteenth century. On page 10 he says: "I asked Mr. Bartlett the other day where we should emigrate to if all the terrible things took place which those socialists threaten." At this point Julian hasn't been enlightened yet of the true horrors of capitalism and feels quite threatened by the growth of the working classes. On page 9 he also complains about "a small band of men who called themselves anarchists, and proposed to terrify the American people into adopting their ideas by threats of violence, as if a mighty nation which had but just put down a rebellion of half its own numbers, in order to maintain its political system, were likely to adopt a new social system out of fear." Both quotes exhibit a clear aversion to radical leftists.

<sup>4</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 30 for "national organization of labor"; 89 for "national force of workers"; 26 for "national industries"; and 123 for "the national party."

<sup>5</sup> Sylvia E. Bowman, *Edward Bellamy Abroad: An America Prophet's Influence* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962), 33. Perhaps, describing a 'red scare' in the 1880s is the anachronism of a leftist academic who had just lived through McCarthyism.

<sup>6</sup> Bowman, *Edward*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 529.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 438.

<sup>9</sup> Bellamy, *Looking*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Lipow, *Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy & The Nationalist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 16-29.

<sup>11</sup> Lipow, *Authoritarian*, 162-174.

<sup>12</sup> Bowman, *Edward*, 432-433.

<sup>13</sup> Lipow, *Authoritarian*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> In fact one of the chapters in Bowman's *Edward Bellamy Abroad* is concerned with the Netherlands. One might hope that *The Bellamy Association of Holland* (206-225) answers the questions raised in this essay, but unfortunately the article is not satisfactory. The writers are not scholars, but Dutch Bellamy propagandists. They fail to cite most of their sources. More importantly, they focus on their own Bellamy Association, paying little attention to the other groups that have taken interest in Bellamy in the Netherlands.

<sup>15</sup> The chapter in *Edward Bellamy Abroad* about the Netherlands mainly deals with the IVB. Furthermore, three dissertations have looked into the IVB: Frieswijk, T.J., *In het voetspoor van Edward Bellamy. De ontwikkeling van de Internationale Vereeniging Bellamy gedurende het interbellum* (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 1987); Hoorweg, M., *De Internationale Vereeniging Bellamy 1932-1982. Ideologie en mobilisatie van een utopische sociale beweging* (PhD diss., Erasmus University Rotterdam, 1988); Ojens H., *Terugblik vanuit het jaar 2000, Bellamy en Bellamyisme in Nederland* (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 1982). Unfortunately all three have remained unpublished, but can be requested from their respective universities.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Bellamy, *In het Jaar 2000*, translated by Frank van der Goes (Amsterdam: S.L. Van Looy, 1890).

<sup>17</sup> Frank van der Goes, "Studies in socialisme," in *De Nieuwe Gids, Jaargang 6 Deel 1* (Amsterdam: W. Versluys, 1891), 369-404.

<sup>18</sup> The translations in this essay are mine.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Bellamy, *In het Jaar 2000*, translated by Henri Polak (Amsterdam: Cohen Brothers, 1930).

<sup>20</sup> Allard Pierson, "Een Brief," in *De Nieuwe Gids, Jaargang 6 Deel 1* (Amsterdam: W. Versluys, 1891), 88-97.

<sup>21</sup> Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, "Generaal Booth van het Heilsleger en zijn plan," in *De Nieuwe Gids, Jaargang 6 Deel 2* (Amsterdam: W. Versluys, 1891), 233-269.

<sup>22</sup> Lodewijk van Deyssel, "Gedachte, kunst, socialisme, enz.," in *De Nieuwe Gids, Jaargang 6 Deel 1* (Amsterdam: W. Versluys, 1891), 249-262.

<sup>23</sup> Van Deyssel, "Gedachte", 249.

<sup>24</sup> Frederik van Eeden, "Over de toekomst," in *De Nieuwe Gids, Jaargang 6 Deel 1* (Amsterdam: W. Versluys, 1891), 1-15.

<sup>25</sup> Frederik van Eeden, *Studies, Eerste Reeks* (Amsterdam: W. Versluys, 1890), 260.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the Walden-colony see Jan Bank and Maarten van Buuren, "Utopisten en socialisten," in *1900. Hoogtij van burgerlijke cultuur*, ed. Jan Bank and Maarten van Buuren (Den Haag: SDU uitgevers, 2000), 439-483.

<sup>27</sup> Hoorweg, *De Internationale*, 42-60.

<sup>28</sup> Frieswijk, *In het voetspoor*, 52-67.

<sup>29</sup> In fact the IVB remained active into the 1980s and as recently as 2005 appears to have changed its name into the Bellamy Stichting. Their archive is maintained and periodically updated at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

<sup>30</sup> The NBP has received no scholarly attention, but sources can be found at the International Institute of Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam. See: IISG ZF 58119, *Welvaart voor allen : orgaan van de Nederlandsche Bellamy-Partij : maandblad ter bevordering van vrede en welvaart volgens de beginselen van Edward Bellamy (1850-1898)*, jr. 3, nr. 20, May 21st, 1947.

<sup>31</sup> IISG ZF 58119, *Welvaart voor allen : orgaan van de Nederlandsche Bellamy-Partij : maandblad ter bevordering van vrede en welvaart volgens de beginselen van Edward Bellamy (1850-1898)*, jr. 1, nr. 3, November 1945.

<sup>32</sup> IISG ZF 58119, *Welvaart voor allen : orgaan van de Nederlandsche Bellamy-Partij : maandblad ter bevordering van vrede en welvaart volgens de beginselen van Edward Bellamy (1850-1898)*, jr. 2, nr. 6, February 1946.

<sup>33</sup> F. K. van Iterson, *Parlement en kiezer* (Den Haag, 1946), 194-195.

<sup>34</sup> IISG ARCH00872, Archief Hedwig Meyers-Kehrer, inv.nr. 5, Aan de leden der VPW.

<sup>35</sup> The NBP merged into the Vooruitstrevende Partij voor Wereldregering in 1948. This party in turn merged into the Socialistische Unie in 1952. De Socialistische Unie was the precursor of the Pacifistisch Socialistische Partij. And the PSP finally combined with the Communist Party in 1989 to form GroenLinks.

<sup>36</sup> 'Socialistische stem / Kerkelijke tegenstem', *Het Parool*, February 11th, 1953, accessible via Delpher.

<sup>37</sup> Bellamy's 1897 sequel *Equality* in fact envisioned a much more democratic society. But this book, lacking even the limited literary power of *Looking Backward*, was never widely read.

## Reading the Ciudad Juárez Femicides: A Synthetic Interpretation of Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood* and Teresa Rodriguez's *Daughters of Juárez*

Jan Bant | Leiden University

*This paper was written for the course Mobility, Migration, Transculturation  
in the BA American Studies at the University of Groningen*

The city of Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua, Mexico receives the dubious honor of being the “femicide capitol.”<sup>1</sup> It earned this label due to the seemingly unstoppable and unsolvable murder of women and girls in the city and its outskirts in the last three decades. Migration scholar Marietta Messmer wrote in 2012 that the death toll has reached “far more than 500,” but it is still not known how many women and girls are missing and have yet to be found.<sup>2</sup> The victims – mostly Mexican “young, impoverished women” – are often found “raped, tortured, mutilated, and strangled” and carelessly dumped in the desert surrounding the Mexican border city.<sup>3</sup>

The situation in Ciudad Juárez, now the “longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history,” started in May 1993 when numerous *maquiladoras* – big, mostly American, factories with primarily female assembly-line employees – were erected in the quiet border town.<sup>4</sup> The reason behind this sudden rise was the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. NAFTA is an agreement between Canada, the US, and Mexico to promote free trade on the continent. Even though *maquiladoras* existed before NAFTA, the liberalization of trade caused many more to be built.<sup>5</sup> Already in 1994, “Ciudad Juárez had the largest maquiladora workforce [in Mexico], totaling in excess of two hundred thousand.”<sup>6</sup> The city grew very rapidly with “tens of thousands of workers pouring into the city annually with hopes for a better life.”<sup>7</sup> The frontier of Ciudad Juárez kept expanding and many *maquiladora* workers settled in *colonias*, shanty towns that “resembled temporary camps in the arid foothills surrounding the city.”<sup>8</sup> The poor female proletariat of the *maquiladoras* constitutes the majority of the murder victims.

Uncontrolled and uncontrollable migration of vulnerable girls and women into Ciudad Juárez in combination with underdeveloped and incompetent Mexican authorities created a social context enabling the Juárez femicides. It also created a setting in which both a solution and the perpetrators are unfindable; scapegoats were blamed while the killings went on. Several written narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, offer their interpretation of the femicides. In this essay, two such written narratives will be analyzed, namely Alicia Gaspar de Alba's 2005 mystery novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* and Teresa Rodriguez's 2007 journalistic account *The Daughters of Juárez*. The former highlights the role of the US and NAFTA, whereas the latter focuses on the inability of Mexican authorities to do something about the femicides. Taking these narratives as starting point, this essay argues that they need to be taken together and read synthetically in order to understand the Ciudad Juárez femicides.

Scholars place the responsibility for the femicides with different causes. An important factor is the contextualization of the US-Mexico border as a space where violent events are enabled.



Chicana cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, for instance, visualized the border as “*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.” Anzaldúa argues that the border region by its very nature enables and increases violence, especially for vulnerable groups. Contextualizing the border as an open wound that is familiar with bleeding opens up diverse alleys of theorizing. Maria Cristina Morales and Cynthia Bejarano argue, for example, that the femicides are forms of border sexual conquest, manifestations of sexual violence enabled by the socio-economic context of the US-Mexico border. “[B]order sexual conquest occurs when nation-states, along with transnational corporations, exacerbate sexual and gendered violence through the exploitation of local places and their people [...] whom they perceive as marginalized and ‘marginalizable.’”<sup>10</sup>

Another influential component in the femicides are Mexican (narco-)politics and the inadequacy of official authorities. Specifically, Mexican authorities are accused of not taking the murders seriously and not taking any action. The unwillingness of the mainly male police force is rooted in a patriarchal attitude that maintains that women should stay in the domestic sphere.<sup>11</sup> Following this discourse, women ought not to work, and if they do, they are framed as ‘public women,’ which carries connotations of prostitution in Mexican society. Therefore, “taken to its logical extreme, the government’s public woman discourse explains that, while unfortunate, the deaths of public women represent a kind of public cleansing.”<sup>12</sup> Official government narratives blame the victims and thus create a space where the actual perpetrators of the femicides can roam freely.

Other scholars place the responsibility for the murders mainly with NAFTA, the American *maquiladoras*, and the US more generally. As noted earlier, many *maquiladoras* were built in Ciudad Juárez due to NAFTA, which increased employment opportunities in the city. This formed an incentive for immense and uncontrolled migration of poor people into the border city. Women in the *maquiladoras* work long and often irregular shifts and therefore travel in the dark, which puts them in an even more vulnerable position. Moreover, women in the factories are treated badly, and this misogynistic attitude is not contained within the walls: “when a kind of disrespect and gendered violence is common and typical inside the factory it is not unusual to have it extend outwards to the whole environment within which the worker is sought, recruited, hired, treated, mistreated and not cared for.”<sup>13</sup> Another reason why responsibility is placed with US-backed NAFTA is because the logic of a capitalist mode of production is applied to the female proletariat: “they work machines and are treated like extensions of machinery.”<sup>14</sup> Because “the norm of the world created by the rules of the fair trade game [...] is unforgiving dehumanization,” the women are regarded as expendable.<sup>15</sup> As such, the *maquiladoras* possess a “fatal indifference” concerning the well-being of the female workforce.<sup>16</sup>

Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s mystery novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* places the responsibility for the murders with NAFTA and the United States, both symbolically and explicitly. The book’s protagonist is Ivon Villa, a Mexican-American academic who lives in California but was born in El Paso, Texas – the American city adjacent to Ciudad Juárez. When Ivon comes back to El Paso to adopt a child, her little sister is kidnapped by a group of Mexican and American men running a (child) sex abuse ring, and the Mexican girl carrying her to-be-adopted baby is killed. Through these events Ivon becomes entangled in the web of femicides. First of all, *Desert Blood* symbolically highlights the role of NAFTA in the murders: American coins are found inside and



surrounding the corpses of the murdered women. Ivon first notices this when she is in a morgue to look at the corpse of the girl who was carrying her to-be-adopted baby. “Ivon noticed something that looked like coins: blackened, corroded coins mixed with pennies.”<sup>17</sup> During another autopsy, a doctor said that “some of the bodies [...] had American pennies inside them [...] In the vagina, in the rectum, under the tongue.”<sup>18</sup> This discovery prompted Ivon to have the following conversation with her cousin Ximena:

*“Max said it best.” Ivon repeated what Max had said earlier. “Just like Abe Lincoln’s been shoved down her throat.”*

*“Just like the maquilas themselves have been shoved down Mexico’s throat...” added Ximena.*

*“...because of NAFTA,” Ivon finished the sentence.*<sup>19</sup>

What is more, the people who kidnapped Ivon’s sister call their victims “lucky pennies.”<sup>20</sup>

The coins found in and around the corpses are, as Ivon already noted, symbolic for the role of NAFTA in the lives of the victims. This motive returns in a conversation between Father Francis, an activist priest, and Rubí Reyna, a feminist TV-program maker, about the causes of the femicides:

*“Are you justifying the murders, then, Father?” asked Rubí.*

*“Of course not. But let’s just say that I understand the social context for the crimes, which is, ultimately, a Catholic context, you see? The women are being sacrificed to redeem the men for their inability to provide for their families, their social emasculation, if you will, at the hands of the American corporations.”*

*“Are you suggesting, then, Father, that these murders are a consequence of the North American Free Trade Agreement?”*

*Father Francis squinted and rubbed his chin. “It’s very possible,” he said.*<sup>21</sup>

On yet another occasion, Ivon explicitly places the responsibility for the femicides with NAFTA: “NAFTA’s brought thousands of poor, brown, fertile female bodies to the border to work at a *maquiladora*.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, Gaspar de Alba offers a narrative in which the results of NAFTA put thousands of girls and women in an extremely vulnerable situation and in which the perpetrators are not to be found.

Another way *Desert Blood* points at American responsibility for the femicides is by focusing on American sex tourism. The porn and snuff films – for which many girls in the novel are kidnapped – have American males as target audience. For instance, the website *Borderlines* boasts that “every week hundreds of young Mexican girls arrive in Juárez from all over Mexico [...] you will not find a place with more beautiful, available, hot-blooded young ladies.”<sup>23</sup> In reality, Gaspar de

Alba notes, El Paso served as “the largest dumping ground of sex offenders in the country” until 2002.<sup>24</sup> In short, *Desert Blood* strongly places the responsibility for the femicides with the United States. Even though Messmer argues in her 2012 paper “Transfrontera Crimes” that the book “foregrounds the transnational and transborder dimensions of the Juárez femicides,” *Desert Blood* mainly focuses on US responsibility for the crimes and diminishes Mexican influence.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, Teresa Rodríguez’s *The Daughters of Juárez* does resolutely place Mexican involvement on the foreground and consequently places the responsibility for the femicides with Mexican authorities. As a journalistic account, it traces the chronology of events since the first murders. By concentrating on a number of failures by Mexican authorities, Rodríguez shows why the perpetrators are still not caught. First of all, Rodríguez highlights the misogynistic attitude of Mexican officials. When relatives of disappeared girls go to the police, they are often asked whether the girl has a boyfriend, what she was wearing, or if she partied often.<sup>26</sup> Authorities often imply that the girls ran off with their boyfriend, or that they led double lives and were secretly prostitutes.<sup>27</sup> All of this culminates in a culture that blames the victims for their own death.<sup>28</sup> This attitude not only “prompted officials to overlook the growing number of poor Mexican girls whose violated, butchered bodies had been turning up in the desert,” but official reports claim that it also hindered “the adoption of public policies that would protect women.”<sup>29</sup>

Besides the sexism of Mexican authorities, Rodríguez highlights their incompetence and carelessness. Mexican officials sometimes incorrectly identify victims, and the failure of Mexican law enforcement to correctly preserve a crime scene has caused information, data, and possible leads to disappear.<sup>30</sup> This situation is so severe that 2004 “marked the first time authorities had properly preserved the crime scene” – this was eleven years after the first murder.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, even if crime scenes were correctly preserved, they had low priority: special federal prosecutor María López Urbina reviewed 205 homicide files of which “101 had not advanced past the investigative stage.”<sup>32</sup> Rodríguez also argues that the Mexican police force is corrupt: “it was widely believed that many officers accepted bribes to make ends meet or had taken the job to earn the extra side money assisting drug dealers.”<sup>33</sup>

Another important reason why the murders are still unsolved is because Mexican authorities were all too eager to blame the murders on several scapegoats. The most notorious was an Egyptian engineer called Abdel Latif Sharif working as an engineer in a *maquiladora*, but gang members also often received blame.<sup>34</sup> While neither Sharif nor the gang members were completely innocent – Sharif often visited (underage) prostitutes and had been convicted for a sex-related crime in the US – they were not the real perpetrators. The scapegoats confessed, often after being tortured, but the killings did not stop with their incarceration. This incompetence sometimes seems purposeful, since “whoever tried to get to the bottom of the crimes was either threatened, fired, forced to resign, or killed.”<sup>35</sup> In conclusion, the narrative Rodríguez offers strongly points at Mexican authorities’ incompetence and even complicity in the femicides. Like Gaspar de Alba’s narrative, Rodríguez does not focus merely on one side of the story, but does strongly highlight one and leaves the other(s) at relative ease.

While both narratives highlight important aspects of the Ciudad Juárez femicides, interpreting them separately gives a one-dimensional view of the events. Merely relying on Gaspar de Alba’s book will give too much weight to NAFTA while playing down the incompetence and

possible complicity of Mexican officials, while a full reliance on Rodríguez's journalistic account will result in an interpretation that merely focuses on the incompetence of Mexican authorities. The international circumstances that enable the femicides, as highlighted by Gaspar de Alba, are as significant as the corruption outlined by Rodríguez. The main difference, then, between the two narratives is their focus: Gaspar de Alba focuses on the macro perspective, on the broader context picture which enables the murders; Rodríguez focuses on the actual events that took place and the official reactions - or lack thereof - on these events. Thus, to understand the murders in Ciudad Juárez, one needs to bring the books in connection with each other, and create a synthesis from their separate perspectives: they have to be read and understood together in order to fill the gaps the other leaves open. Only then can one start to grasp the gravity of the situation and the many layers of meaning that play a role in it; only then can the Ciudad Juárez femicides be seen as the perfect storm which has been created in the last decades. It goes without saying, however, that the situation in Ciudad Juárez is much too complex for this essay to solve; it does not offer an exhaustive truth on the basis of merely two books. Nevertheless, these books do offer us compelling leads in understanding the transborder femicides.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elvia R. Arriola, "Justice Interrupted: The Ciudad Juárez Femicides & Global Social Responsibility," *La Voz de Esperanza* 23, no. 2 (2010): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Marietta Messmer, "Transfrontera Crimes: Representations of the Juárez Femicides in Recent Fictional and Non-Fictional Accounts," *American Studies Journal* 57, no. 3 (2012). Web.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Cristina Morales and Cynthia Bejarano, "Transnational Sexual and Gendered Violence: An Application of Border Sexual Conquest at a Mexico-US border," *Global Networks* 9, no. 3 (2009): 420; Messmer, "Transfrontera Crimes."

<sup>4</sup> Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán, "*Feminicidio*: The 'Black Legend' of the Border," in *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, eds. Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Teresa Rodríguez, with Diana Montané and Lisa Pulitzer. *The Daughters of Juárez: A True Story of Serial Murder South of the Border* (New York: Atria Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Rodríguez, *The Daughters of Juárez*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Morales and Bejarano, "Transnational Sexual and Gendered Violence," 424.

<sup>11</sup> Melissa W. Wright, "Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border," *Signs* 36, no. 3 (2011): 713.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Arriola, "Justice Interrupted," 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2005), 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 252-253.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>25</sup> Messmer, "Transfrontera Crimes."

<sup>26</sup> Rodríguez, *The Daughters of Juárez*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 21, 293.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 44, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 221.

## The Land of Cars, Crime, and Capitalism: The European Imagination of the United States in Hergé's *Tintin in America*

Job Wester | University of Amsterdam

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in the MA program in American Studies*

There is something distinctly different between American and European comics. The supernatural heroes of Marvel and DC comics are mirrored by Europe's innocent and exceedingly normal protagonists. The Flash and Spider-Man are mutants, their worlds are fantastical and limitless in their science-fiction, as are the villains. The American comic portrays the battle between good and evil as a superhuman affair; in the end, it is mythical talent or hard work that leads to victory, never luck. The Franco-Belgian comic tradition puts forward different heroes; Gaston, the lazy office worker whose battles are never to save the world, but rather to avoid any effort in the first place. Similarly, the adolescent duo Spike and Suzy – later Americanized to Willy and Wanda – struggle more with their pubescent stubbornness than the evils of their enemies. If Superman represents the American Comic, Tintin is the poster child for Europe. Born of divine origin, Superman is the archetypal superhero, his origin story as rich as his chin is defined. His fight with the criminal underworld is always won through omnipotence. The world of Tintin follows different rules. The protagonist, round-faced and of unidentified adolescent age, is a smart but naïve reporter. The villains are evil but cunning, his friends kind but oblivious. The Tintin comics were first published in the conservative Belgian newspaper *Le Vingtième Siècle* in 1929 at the hand of Hergé, the pseudonym of George Prosper Remi. In his first adventure, Tintin travels through the land of the Soviets in order to give a satirical account of Russia's failing economy and industry. The comic was a success and *Le Vingtième Siècle* sent Tintin out for a second fictional adventure. In what would become Hergé's most controversial comic, *Tintin in the Congo*, the boy reporter uncovers a crime syndicate and saves the primitive village from certain demise. The intervention of the white savior Tintin proves the need for the paternalistic Belgian colonization of Congo. His third album was intended to continue the same ideological line, for the comic medium had proven to be a popular and effective tool for propaganda. Hergé, having earned more autonomy, chose his own course for his critiques in *Tintin in America* (1932). The third Tintin album is set in the United States of the early 1930s and is not just a variation on the Western novel, the fetishization of the battle between cowboy and savage; it is instead an inherently political satire of American culture and economy. *Tintin in America* as a document gives insight into the Belgian imagination of the American society in the 1930s through the looking glass of a conservative Catholic newspaper comic.

Hergé had never been to the United States, just like he had never been to the Soviet Union or Belgian Congo. He had to construct his comics on the perceptions available in contemporary media. As a boy scout, he had grown to be infatuated by Native Americans. Through Western films, Hergé had sympathized with them and supported their fight against the white intruder. He wanted

this to be the focus of his critique, his editor Norbert Wallez however did not agree.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Wallez argued, the immediate threats that American Society posed to the Catholic Conservative Belgium were not its fight with natives, but its relentless capitalism and organized crime. Hergé opted for Al Capone's Chicago to personify the moral decay permeated in the United States. And again Tintin, the Brussels based child reporter, is sent to investigate.

"Chicago, 1931, when gangster bosses ruled the city," Al Capone instructs his men to hunt down and eliminate Tintin "world reporter number one." In what would become a running theme throughout the comic, Tintin is tricked and kidnapped just three panels after his arrival, only to escape again another six panels later. "Trust me to be in the land of the automobile and have to slog ten miles on foot," even Tintin's dog Snowy is frustratingly aware of Fordian industry and America's car reliant society. Chicago is in its portrayal both admired for its modernity – Tintin's hotel room is a whopping thirty-seven floors high – as well as condemned for its hopeless misery. The police are incompetent, corrupt, and thoroughly ineffective against 'King' Al Capone and the GSC, the Gangster Syndicate of Chicago; even crime is corporatized. The perception of American violence is personified in the prolific assassin, eager to receive quick payment for he has a fourth assassination appointment that same morning. The comic's narrative leads Tintin to the other America, the wilderness, the native lands. Tintin takes a train to "Redskin City."

In the original version of the comic, Tintin's first encounter with the Native Americans was the most political statement to that point. After he descends from the train, Tintin encounters an old figure covered in a native blanket, begging. Above the man hangs a sign: "Don't forget the Poor Natives – Redskin City, USA, Tourist Office." The sidestep to the Native American territories was Hergé's personal attempt to vindicate the Native Americans, voicing critiques of their treatment by white European settlers. In the representation of the tribe, Hergé had taken great care in portraying them historically and culturally accurate. Visits to the Brussels ethnographic museum and the description found in René Thévenin and Paul Coze's *Customs and History of the Indian Redskins* (1928) helped Hergé construct a somewhat accurate and dignified visual depiction of the Blackfoot Confederacy.<sup>2</sup> Yet their noble pacifism is disturbed by the comic's main antagonist, gang leader Bobby Smiles who recruits the tribe in his fight against Tintin. The Natives are gullible and easily fooled by the cunning white man. In captivity Tintin also manages to antagonize the Blackfoot Indians by playing into the violent nature of the Natives, securing his escape in their brawl. At the end of the Native American chapter, the reader encounters Hergé's most definitive condemnation of American society. In his exploration through the ancestral grounds of the Blackfoot tribe, Tintin stumbles upon an unexplored oil source. The same panel shows a caravan of cars approaching the unsuspecting Tintin. "Ok son! Here's your contract... Five thousand Dollars for your oil well." "How did you know there was an oil well here?" Tintin responds. "Unerring American know-how." Soon a bidding war between oil magnates kicks off. Tintin does not fold. "I'm terribly sorry gentlemen, but that oil well isn't mine to sell. It belongs to the Blackfoot Indians who live in this part of the country." An hour goes by, and the Natives are driven out by armed forces: their exodus has started. Two hours later, scaffolding is in place, and the construction is in full swing. By the next morning, the American metropolis is complete, skyscrapers and cars contest the city center. Tintin, still in Western clothes, looks bewildered. Hergé makes a powerful statement against American capitalist expansion. The overtly political series of panels are out of place and clashed with the demands of



foreign publishers, but Hergé refused to adapt.<sup>3</sup> This was his view of America, and that had to be shown.

Despite publisher discouragements, Hergé continued his unfiltered story of America, sometimes in jest, other times more sinister. *Tintin in America* gets darkest when a lynch mob chases and catches Tintin, mistaking him for a bank robber. Our protagonist is lynched without a trial, only to be saved by the snapping of the noose. A laughing mob tries again. The scene is absurdly morbid – to reiterate; this is a children’s book – but Hergé does not just comment on American lynch culture or mob justice, he attacks American crime in general. Through a radio broadcast, the lynching is accompanied by a seemingly unrelated announcement of statistics. “Twenty-four banks have failed, twenty-four managers are in jail. Thirty-five babies have been kidnapped ... Forty-four hoboes have been lynched.”<sup>4</sup> It prompts the drunk sheriff to leave his station, collapsing underneath a large sign explaining the Volstead Act, Hergé’s sense for irony is unsubtle. Other criticisms are more benign; the excessive care for animal welfare – and love for acronyms – symbolized in the AAAA, the American Association of Animal Admirers, or the commercialization of personality; the entrepreneurial mob returns, this time to outbid each other for Tintin’s image rights. Hergé points to curious European stereotypes about Americans. A personal favorite is the joke about American religion as advertised on the streets of Chicago: “Profit from our new religion! Join the Brothers of Neo-judeo-buddho-islamo-americanism, and earn the highest dividends in the world.”<sup>5</sup> Capitalism as religion, money as sacred, Hergé indulged his smug European Catholic readers with tales of a depraved American society.

Hergé’s limited knowledge of American society, beyond his obsession with Native Americans, was supplemented by Georges Duhamel’s 1930 novel *Scènes de la Vie Future*, a French account of travels along the Mississippi River, Chicago, and New York. Duhamel’s book was a warning to the European reader; at all cost must the American way of life be avoided. He primarily pointed to soulless American automation, consumerism, and Puritan spirit. These convictions, combined with his editor’s insistence on covering American crime, would construct Tintin’s adventure. Hergé contributed his personal affection with Native Americans and combined American capitalism and American crime into satires of crime corporations: the ‘Gangster Syndicate of Chicago,’ the ‘Moonshine club: bootleggers to the white house,’ and ‘Kidnap INC.’

The scope of Hergé’s audience in 1931 was too limited to be taking the demands of foreign publications into consideration. After *Le Vingtième Siècle* was disbanded by the Nazis, Hergé switched employers, and in 1945 he redrew his original comics to better fit with his newer color comics. The second edition of *Tintin in America* changed dramatically in style, but also saw some narrative changes to accommodate for the contemporary audience. Ransom demands were adjusted to inflation, 1930s references were traded in for more modern ones, and the begging Native figure with the appeal to not “forget the Native Indian” was removed. As Tintin became an international phenomenon, references to Tintin’s Belgium identity were changed to a broader European description. From then onwards, Tintin’s adventure in the United States became the cultural representation of American society for a pan-European audience. Forty-two years after Tintin first traveled to the United States the popularity of the color version had attained such a degree of commercial success that for the first time *Tintin in America* was set to be published transatlantically. The anti-American sentiment that pervaded the original comic proved to be a difficult cultural hurdle

to overcome, for the political condemnations were too central to the plot to completely avoid. But the persecution of the Blackfoot Native people would remain. Hergé and the American publisher settled on a few compromises in the 1973 edition. Both the 1931 and the 1945 versions of the story include illustrations of African-American characters throughout the portrayals of Chicago. It was the American publisher who objected to the images of the black figures, uneasy with the encouragement of unsegregated living in a children's tale.<sup>6</sup> Al Capone's formerly African American right-hand man turned Hispanic, the African American doorman overseeing American urban construction was removed, and a poor black lady holding a crying baby was replaced with a Caucasian mother. The whitewashing of the 1973 version seems extra curious when the original depiction of African Americans is very undignified in its own right. Thick lipped and without speech, the racial caricatures are placed in the outskirts of society; the henchman, the servant, and the helpless single mother. The change appeased American publishers, at the same time it also relieved Hergé of the for him impossible task of drawing and including African-Americans in a respectful and appropriate manner; Hergé's depiction of Africans in this comic and in *Tintin in Africa* never exceeded crude racial stereotypes. That he was, in fact, concerned with the fate of people of color in American society is reflected in the second compromise of the 1973 edition. In the European editions of the comic the lynch-happy village in the American West is condemned for its small-town racism. When in the comic reports of the bank robbery reached the villagers, they "raised the alarm, and hanged seven *négres* right away."<sup>7</sup> The English translation settled on "a few fellers" instead. Hergé aimed to highlight criminal injustices disproportionately affecting African Americans, the publisher's compromise sought to defuse the racial connotation.

*Tintin in America* was Hergé's breakthrough into mainstream recognition. The primary task of conveying politics in his comics could be abandoned in later Tintin adventures as he lost his attachment to *Le Vingtième Siècle*. The comic's legacy is an account of a reporter's travels through the United States. More importantly, it is a satire of American culture written by proxy. Hergé is no Duhamel, but *Tintin in America* does reward a close reading, for it tells us about European perceptions of America in 1930s popular media. The sentiment conveyed through Tintin is one of weary caution, skeptical of modernity, consumerism, and Puritan law that will lead to corruption, crime, and displacement of native peoples. Hergé's noble concerns with Native Americans and exploited factory workers point to a flawed understanding of *Tintin in America* as a progressive document. Instead, the comic is paradigmatic for European hypocrisy, anxious about the fading grip that its empire once had on the world. Although *Tintin in America* was Hergé's last political comic, the United States return in later editions, but are never redeemed. In *Tintin and the Shooting Star* (1942), Hergé imagines a scientific race to polar exploration between European scientists and their cheating American rivals. Tintin written during World War II meant allying with Germany against the United States, their roles reversed. In another feat of technological rivalry, Tintin departs on a largely prophetic moon landing expedition in 1950, the most significant flaw in his prediction; the shuttle launches and lands on the European continent. Hergé's first three Tintins are descriptions of European frontiers, anxious admonitions against eastern Soviet Communism, southern African primitive brutality, and Western American cruel modernity. The contemporary reader would always conclude at the end of a Tintin adventure that there is no place like Europe. Hergé's Tintin comics are set in the world of European supremacy. As global power dynamics are shifting, Tintin's

European morals and technological feats are consoling to the readers of a dwindling European empire. Tintin is not a Tocquevillian reporter of the United States, but a satire serving to comfort the changing societies of the Catholic Belgian comic fan.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Farr, *Tintin: The Complete Companion* (London: John Murray Ltd., 2001), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Farr, *Companion*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Hergé, *Tintin in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1979), 36. <http://www.blackkat.net/tintin/pdf/03%20-%20Tintin%20In%20America.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Thomson, *Tintin: Hergé and his Creation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Translated from the French edition.

## Demythologizing the Westward March of Empire: Depictions of the American West in Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989) and Jon Maclean's *Slow West* (2015)

Abigail Lister | Leiden University

*This paper was written for the course The Rise and Decline of the American Empire in the MA program North American Studies*

Patricia Limerick, in her seminal revisionist history of the American West, *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987), calls the westward expansion of the North American continent “the conquest of Western America”; she says that the expansion of settlers across the newly-discovered American continent was a “literal, territorial form of economic growth.”<sup>1</sup> While critics such as David J. Silbey in his *A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War* have already made a connection between U.S. expansion into Pacific nations as an example of a growing American empire, the connection between empire and the westward expansion of the American continent in the nineteenth century has not been explored as frequently.

In this article, I take the argument that the expansion of the American West was an imperial venture as the starting point for my investigation of two texts dealing predominantly with the West: Paul Auster's novel *Moon Palace* (1989) and Jon Maclean's film *Slow West* (2015). As Limerick writes, “in the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness.”<sup>2</sup> I will argue that it is this mythical, constructed view of the West that these texts struggle against, instead formulating a new vision of the realities of Western expansionism. *Moon Palace* is a postmodernist novel, in which Auster uses the personal quest of narrator Marco Stanley Fogg to undermine the idea of a preordained settlement of the American land, as well as exploring the idea of the West as a ‘fiction’. *Slow West*, written and directed by Scotsman Jon Maclean, explicitly interrogates the stereotype of the West as an idealized area, an ideology epitomized by protagonist Jay Cavendish, and destroys the idea of uncomplicated westward expansion. To take the words of one *Slow West* critic, both texts are “absurdist deconstruction[s] of classic Hollywood westerns.”<sup>3</sup> This article aims to show that by employing postmodernist tropes, Western traditions and, in the case of *Slow West*, comedic timing, these texts challenge our preconceptions about the West and reveal a truer image of the American empire in the West. Before exploring these texts, it is first necessary to define the term ‘empire.’ As will become clear, the settlement of the West only partly fulfills a traditional definition of imperialism, yet it is still possible to define the venture as an example of an expanding American empire.

Charles Maier argues in his work on the origins of American empire, *Among Empires* (2006), that “Empire does not mean just the accumulation of lands abroad by conquest. And it does not mean just the imposition of authoritarian regimes on overseas territory.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, Maier formulates a broader definition of empire and imperialism, and argues against the widely held idea that because America was not strictly focused on international territorial acquisitions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the growth of the United States was not imperial. As Maier notes, the

acquisition of Native American land on the continent “[was] hardly seen as expansion by most Americans at that time – they believed they were just taking possession of land already granted them by the Treaty of Paris in 1783.”<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Mark Joy rightly points out that “early American expansion was aimed at land and resources, not acquisition of a subject class of colonials,” which removes American westward expansion from more traditional definitions of empire based on the history of the Roman Empire.<sup>6</sup> However, when viewing the West, one must look beyond traditional definitions of empire – as Maier does – and focus on the more important factor in the history of westward expansion: namely, that the land acquired “was *not* empty, and the peoples who were deemed ‘in the way’ were treated in an imperial fashion.”<sup>7</sup>

The treatment of Westward expansion as a colonial venture can be found in a number of texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this time, politicians and historians proclaimed the settlement of Western land to be an example of ‘empire building,’ but in the most positive sense. Prompted by the ratification of the newly-formed Constitution in 1788, politician Hugh Henry Breckenridge proclaimed to an audience in Pittsburgh: “you are now citizens of a new empire: an empire, not the effect of chance, not hewn out by the sword; but formed by the skill of sages, and the design of wise men.”<sup>8</sup> Earlier in the same century, Benjamin Franklin had advocated westward advancement in his treatise ‘Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind’ (1751). In it, Franklin proffered the solution of expanded conquest across North America to aid the growth of the American nation. “Hence the Prince that acquires new Territory,” Franklin writes, “if he finds it vacant, or removes the Natives to give his own People Room...may be properly called [Father] of their Nation, as they are the Cause of the Generation of Multitudes.”<sup>9</sup> Gerald Stourzh considers Franklin’s treatise “the first conscious and comprehensive formulation of ‘Manifest Destiny’”; certainly, in conceiving of the West as “the embodiment of human freedom, political justice, and material progress,” at a disregard for the native population of the country, Franklin can also be considered a proponent of the idea of the ‘Western empire.’<sup>10</sup>

Returning to the late-nineteenth century, it was Frederick Jackson Turner’s historical thesis *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893) that first made explicit the importance of westward movement to the American nation. Turner’s fundamental argument was that American history and character had been shaped by and through “the colonization of the Great West.”<sup>11</sup> Though Turner “was not himself an expansionist,” Turner’s contemporaries were able to read in his arguments a justification for increased American imperial expansion, this time internationally.<sup>12</sup> Hence, this demonstrates an awareness of American continental expansion as an imperial venture, which was now used as a justification for other similar pursuits. As David Wrobel writes, “the events of the late 1890s that helped restore national confidence – victory over Spain and the expansionism that followed – were often justified by intellectuals expressing concern over the closing of the continental frontier.”<sup>13</sup> Or, to put it more bluntly, “now that the nation had mastered its own frontier, it was ready to embark on the divinely ordained conquest of new ones.”<sup>14</sup> Even future president Woodrow Wilson said in 1901 that he believed “the law of expansionism into new territory” was the abiding American law.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American politicians and historians considered westward expansion to be an example of an expanding American empire. Not only this, but the imperial conquest of the West was also used in the 1890s as an argument for the

conquest of other countries, including the Philippines, as David Silbey argues. Building upon this positive image of divinely ordained westward expansion, the conquest of the West was transformed in twentieth-century popular culture into “stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness.”<sup>16</sup> Popular movies and literature chose to ignore the realities of America as a “state built on successive waves of dispossession, colonization, and acquisition,” and emphasized a romantic image of the settlement of the West, as in the stereotypical Western film of the mid-twentieth-century.<sup>17</sup> It is precisely this mythical image of the West that *Moon Palace* and *Slow West* endeavor to deconstruct. These texts probe the origins of the American continent, and expose the settlement of the West as intrinsically imperial in nature and destructive in reality.

Paul Auster’s 1989 novel *Moon Palace* follows the life of protagonist and narrator Marco Stanley Fogg during his time at college in New York in the 1960s, and later, his struggles after college as he attempts to make sense of his own identity and that of his family. Though much of the novel is set in New York, the West becomes a symbolic landscape, linking certain characters together and becoming important in Fogg’s family history. Auster employs the history of the West in the novel, as well as related ideas of conquest and exploration, in order to question the position of the West as a real place in the American imagination. As Linda Hutcheon argues, in characteristically postmodern fashion the novel “puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real.”<sup>18</sup> The story is filled with symbolic imagery relating to the idea of conquest, and thus *Moon Palace* clearly explores the idea of the origins of the American nation, linking “the origins and becoming of a nation” to that of “a young American within it,” Marco Stanley Fogg.<sup>19</sup>

Auster begins the novel by placing Fogg within a larger global narrative of conquest and colonialism. Fogg narrates in the opening lines, “It was the summer that men first walked on the moon,” emphasizing the themes of exploration and conquest that recur throughout his work.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Auster has explained in an interview that the moon can be thought of in *Moon Palace* as “the last frontier,” one final conquest for the American nation.<sup>21</sup> After situating the novel in American history with this reference, Fogg explains his full name to readers, which is formed from the names of three historical explorers: Marco Polo, Sir Henry Morton Stanley, and Phileas Fogg. However, Fogg explains that these names were not chosen for any particular, significant, reasons, but that his Uncle Victor “found meanings where no one else would have found them, and then, very deftly, he turned them into a form of clandestine support.”<sup>22</sup> Victor imparts meaning into these insignificant names, telling Fogg that his name “proved that travel was in [his] blood, that life would carry [him] to places where no man had ever been before.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Auster succinctly deconstructs the idea of a personal manifest destiny for Fogg, making clear that Fogg’s life is not preordained through his name, but only through the meanings Victor imparts in them. Similarly, I read this as a dismantling of the widely-held belief that the discover and conquest of America was legitimate, when in reality, both Westward expansion and Uncle Victor’s meanings are “bluster and hot air.”<sup>24</sup>

Auster also uses other symbolic characters to further undermine the idea of a manifest destiny for Fogg, and thus for the American nation Fogg represents. The most important of these relationships is between Fogg and the Chinese girl Kitty Wu. To demonstrate how this undermines the idea of conquest within the novel, it is necessary to explore the idea of the “passage to India,” described by Henry Nash Smith in his work of Western myth criticism, *Virgin Land: The American*



*West as Symbol and Myth* (1950). In this work, Smith argues that the idea of the passage to India, “with its associated images of fabulous wealth,” remained “for decades one of the ruling conceptions of American thought about the West.”<sup>25</sup> In the early decades of the nineteenth century, politicians including Thomas Hart Benton considered Asia “a symbol of freedom and national greatness for America,” largely due to the way in which Asian countries and their rich trade could aid America’s growing economy.<sup>26</sup> Marc Chénétier reads the relationship between Fogg and Kitty in the novel as highly ironic, saying, “while Fogg is interested in ‘the discovery of America as a failure to reach China’, he will fail to ‘reach’ the Chinese girl in his quest for America.”<sup>27</sup> I would go further and suggest that their relationship is an ironic rewriting of the myth of the passage to India; however, instead of depicting the project as one leading to wealth, Auster demonstrates that these mythical constructions are fundamentally unreal and impossible.

Though not the first time they have met, the most significant meeting between Fogg and Kitty takes place in Central Park, after Fogg has become homeless. In an episode of delirium, Fogg imagines that Central Park is a huge forest filled with Native Americans. When Kitty approaches him, he calls her “Pocahontas,” the first significant link between the conquest of America and the desired conquest of Asia.<sup>28</sup> Their relationship progresses quickly, and they move in together after a few months; Fogg calls this period of his life his “Chinatown paradise,” saying, “I had found my Canaan, my promised land.”<sup>29</sup> However, though Fogg seems to believe that his relationship with Kitty is predestined – and that he is, symbolically, meant to “‘reach’ the Chinese girl” as Chénétier argues, their relationship falls apart, a symbolic deconstruction of the entire myth of the preordained “passage to India.”

When Fogg is still living in New York, he takes a job caring for an elderly man named Thomas Effing, and it is this plot that will provide the impetus for Fogg’s own trip to the American West later in the novel. It quickly becomes clear that Effing has not only hired Fogg to provide companionship but also to transcribe his life story, to be published as his obituary. Effing narrates to Fogg his time as a painter in the West in the early twentieth century, a trip which he took with his traveling partner, Edward. During the trip, Edward is tragically killed, and Effing must survive on his own by living in a cave for several months. After Effing’s death, Fogg contacts *Art World Monthly* in an effort to get this narrative printed, but he is told that the story is simply too extraordinary to be real. An editor from the journal responds, “I think you might have better luck publishing it if you dropped the charade and submitted it somewhere as a work of fiction.”<sup>30</sup> To understand the relevance of this convergence between fact and fiction, history and story in the novel, it is necessary to understand postmodernist tropes. Linda Hutcheon argues that the postmodern “reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge.”<sup>31</sup> In *Moon Palace*, Auster presents a problematic blurring between history and fiction, which becomes all the more significant when considering the focus of Effing’s story: the American West. Indeed, in another deconstruction of the idea of a real, historical West, when Fogg sets out to find Effing’s cave – a personal quest he deems “an act to annihilate all others” – he finds out that his project is impossible, as the area in which the cave should be found has been flooded in the creation of Lake Powell.<sup>32</sup> Thus, as Hutcheon argues, *Moon Palace* “problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge,” especially knowledge of the West. Though Fogg considers

finding the cave as a highly significant act, fate prevents him from achieving this, and thus it seems as though the historical West is similarly unattainable in the novel.

To return to Hutcheon's argument that the postmodern "puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real," it is evident that in *Moon Palace*, Auster presents a complicated vision of the American West, as well as mythology related to the West. Instead of supporting notions of manifest destiny and an imagined "passage to India," Auster complicates these paradigms through the characters of Kitty Wu and Thomas Effing. Consequently, Auster seems to suggest that the historical West that we consider true and believable is no more than a constructed paradigm in which, as Uncle Victor says, generations of Americans have "found meanings where no one else would have found them."<sup>33</sup>

In a very similar way, John Maclean's contemporary film *Slow West* (2015) also closely examines the American West and the fascination Americans have with it. The story follows Jay Cavendish, a sixteen-year-old boy from a wealthy Scottish family who travels to Colorado in the late nineteenth century to find his love, Rose, who has been forced to flee Scotland with her father. However, though audiences may expect the story to follow the relationship between Jay and Rose, Maclean is "less interested in playing out this youthful love story than he is in examining the costs of manifest destiny from the jaundiced perspective of the outsider."<sup>34</sup> Jay's romantic perspective on the West, as well as a range of integrated immigrant characters, are used to question the idealized version of Western conquest that has become the traditional narrative of the Western film; in other words, the film focuses on "the toll of the American legacy on those populations, native and immigrant, which found themselves displaced" as a result of western conquest.<sup>35</sup> In this way, as Jordan Rossi argues, *Slow West* is "a Western that that refuses to fit within the traditional paradigm of the genre," and Maclean depicts westward expansion as more violent and unforgiving than in traditional Westerns.<sup>36</sup>

Jay's romantic view of the West is made explicit from the very beginning of the film and is notably contrasted with the attitude of lone frontiersman Silas Selleck, who rescues Jay from Confederate soldiers early in the film. The vivid colors of the film, evidently emphasized in post-production, contribute to giving the narrative what Maclean calls "a fairy-tale off-kilter dreamlike quality," which reflects Jay's own perspective on the West too: we see the landscape through his eyes, and this perspective is clearly one of idealization and wonder.<sup>37</sup> Though the opening images of the film depict Jay confidently traveling alone, there are various hints that he has a naïve view of the West, and his eventual meeting with Silas confirms this. Jay rides through the remains of Native American camps, an inclusion that immediately presents the genocide of the Native American population as a "background story" in the film, as Lesley Coffin argues.<sup>38</sup> Tracking shots depict Jay looking down at the Native American women he meets with both confusion and awe, offering the idea that Jay's romantic vision of the West did not include the native population within it. Later, upon meeting a Confederate soldier in the woods, Jay declares, "I am Jay Cavendish, son of Lady Cavendish," to which the soldier replies, "we're all sons of bitches."<sup>39</sup> Though Jay believes his title and prominence in Scotland will aid him in the West, he is immediately proved wrong. Additionally, when Silas arrives to aid Jay, taking Jay's gun to kill the soldier, it is revealed that the gun does not even work - a moment of brief comedy that once again destroys Jay's illusions that he can survive in this foreign environment. In an effort to aid him, Silas begins to purge Jay of his numerous

possessions, removing items one by one from Jay's luggage and throwing them into the woods. One of these items is travel guide *Ho for the West!!!: The Traveller and Emigrant's Handbook to Canada and the North-West states of America* by Edward Hepple Hall, first published in 1856. This book is discarded by Silas, a symbolic act that also removes Jay from an idealized traveler's view of the American West, and places him immediately into a more uncontrollable landscape.

Along Jay and Silas' journey westward, they encounter many immigrant characters, including a group of Congolese singers, a Swedish family, and a German sociologist, as well as having several interactions with the Native American population. Indeed, Jon Maclean has said that his intention in the film was to "present an image of America through a tourist's eyes, and say something truthful about America"; "the American west has this immigrant past that isn't brushed upon in many Westerns," Maclean rightly says.<sup>40</sup> These inclusions contribute to giving the film a very different atmosphere to other Westerns, which often privilege white American perspectives on the West; at the same time, Maclean deconstructs mythological perceptions of the West as a place of refuge or opportunity. In the scene with the Swedish family, Maclean successfully demonstrates both the desperation of immigrants on the frontier, as well as shocking audiences with the unexpected consequences of the violence that accompanies westward expansion. While Jay and Silas take refuge in a general store on the trail, a Swedish couple enters and demands money from the storekeeper. This escalates into a shootout in which the storekeeper and Swedish man are both killed, and Jay must kill the Swedish woman to save his and Silas' lives. The scene does not end here though, and while Jay is still in shock from the violence he has participated in, the pair find two young Swedish children stood outside the store. Scenes like this - accompanied by little background sound to emphasize what can only be called a dramatic and tragic punch line - once again puncture the idealized vision of westward expansion that formed the national narrative of America in the nineteenth century.

In the final twenty minutes of the film, Jay and Silas finally arrive at the homestead where Rose and her father are hiding. In a wide shot, Maclean shows Jay looking out over a field at a small house in the distance - this shot plays on stereotypical Western narratives, such as *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983), which prominently feature homesteads as areas of comfort and repose. Looking out at the house, Jay exclaims, "It's exactly what I imagined." This line is filled with dramatic irony, as viewers have just been shown a bounty hunter - in another significant deconstruction of American idealized history, disguised as a Reverend and in a costume that recalls traditional Puritan clothing - preparing to kill Rose's father, and further violence will also break out at the house shortly afterward. Indeed, in the climactic final scene, Jay bursts into the homestead and is killed by Rose, who clearly does not expect him. In the aftermath of the shoot-out, with Rose and Silas the only survivors, Rose laments, "[his] heart was in the wrong place." This line functions on multiple levels, pointing to the fact that Rose only regarded Jay as a "little brother" as well as the literal fact that Rose shoots him in the heart; however, it also stands as a testament to Jay's naïve and mythical perception of the American West. Maclean repeatedly makes clear in *Slow West* that mythical expectations must give way to reality, and this is made clear through the "tragically random and explosively brutal" violence that occurs throughout the film.<sup>41</sup> This is perhaps the most striking feature of the film, and Maclean ends his narrative with a "haunting montage" of the characters that have been killed through the course of Jay and Silas' journey.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Maclean's vision of the West evidently reacts against

stereotyped, mythological visions of westward movement, and leaves viewers feeling as though, like Jay, their own preconceptions have been destroyed.

Both *Moon Palace* and *Slow West* employ similar tropes in order to deconstruct audiences' conceptions about the West, Manifest Destiny, and westward movement. In *Moon Palace*, Auster presents the historical West as a place with no base in reality, an area created by and through mythological paradigms of western settlement. Protagonist Marco Fogg finds himself at America's West Coast at the end of the novel, declaring that he "had come to the end of the world," a remark which echoes Frederick Jackson Turner's comment that the closing of the frontier represented "the closing of a great historic movement."<sup>43</sup> However, Fogg reverses this lamentation, declaring the western shore to be "where [his] life begins."<sup>44</sup> Here, Auster rejects the conventional idea that American conquest is justifiable – instead, Fogg does not have to conquer more land to discover his identity, and is content with coming to the 'end' of the nation. In a similar ending, the conclusion of *Slow West*, "[invites] viewers to consider the long and lonely trail of bloodshed" that precludes the denouement of the film.<sup>45</sup> In doing so, Maclean comments on idealized views of the West, and instead shows the West to be a place of brutality, with no solution to the bloodshed that conquest inevitably brings. In fact, both texts conform to a postmodernist view of history as "definitely not nostalgic": instead of ascribing to romantic views of the West, these texts use historical tropes and audience expectations of Western narratives to turn history on its head, and demonstrate the true realities and consequences of conquest.<sup>46</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 18, 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Holden, "Review: *Slow West*, a Wry Twist on Classic Frontier Fables", *The New York Times*, 14 May 2015, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/movies/review-slow-west-a-wry-twist-on-classic-frontier-fables.html>, para. 1 of 12.

<sup>4</sup> Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Mark S. Joy, *American Expansionism, 1783-1860: A Manifest Destiny?*, Seminar Studies (Hoboken: Routledge, 2014), xxx.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Henry Breckenridge, quoted in Maier, *Among Empires*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c. (1751)", in *Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings on Politics, Economics, and Virtue*, ed. Alan Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 218-9.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Stourzh, quoted in William Earl Weeks, "Origins of the American Empire and Union", in *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9; Weeks, "Origins of the American Empire and Union", 9.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893)", in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' and Other Essays*, by John Mack Faragher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 31.

<sup>12</sup> David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (UP of Kansas, 1993), 57.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Woodrow Wilson, quoted in Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism*, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, 19.

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- <sup>17</sup> Alejandro Colás, “Open Doors and Closed Frontiers: The Limits of American Empire”, *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 4 (2008): 620.
- <sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 92.
- <sup>19</sup> Chénétier, *Paul Auster as ‘The Wizard of Odds’*, 15.
- <sup>20</sup> Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (Faber and Faber, 1989), 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Paul Auster, “Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory”, *The Red Notebook* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995).
- <sup>22</sup> Auster, *Moon Palace*, 7.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>25</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 23.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>27</sup> Chénétier, *Paul Auster as ‘The Wizard of Odds’*, 72.
- <sup>28</sup> Auster, *Moon Palace*, 70.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 273; *Ibid.*, 228.
- <sup>30</sup> Auster, *Moon Palace*, 231.
- <sup>31</sup> Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, 89.
- <sup>32</sup> Auster, *Moon Palace*, 303-305.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>34</sup> Justin Chang, “Film Review: *Slow West*”, *Variety* (blog), 14 February 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/film/festivals/film-review-slow-west-1201433922/>, para. 3 of 7.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> Jordan Rossi, “The Interview: John Maclean - *Slow West*”, *Hunger* (blog), 26 June 2015, <http://www.hungertv.com/feature/the-interview-john-maclean-slow-west/>.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> Lesley Coffin, “The Mary Sue Interview: *Slow West*’s Writer/Director John MacLean On Making A Movie With Fassbender and Feminism”, 11 May 2015, <https://www.themarysue.com/interview-slow-west/>.
- <sup>39</sup> Jon Maclean, *Slow West* (A24, 2015).
- <sup>40</sup> Coffin, “The Mary Sue Interview”.
- <sup>41</sup> Mark Kermode, ‘*Slow West* Review - a Lyrical Ode to Love on the Wild Frontier’, *The Guardian*, 28 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/28/slow-west-review-mark-kermode>, para. 8 of 9.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893)”, 31.
- <sup>44</sup> Auster, *Moon Palace*, 306.
- <sup>45</sup> Chang, “Film Review: *Slow West*”, para. 7 of 7.
- <sup>46</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 39.



## Washed in the Blood of the Lamb: Challenging American Exceptionalism in *Bioshock Infinite*

Daan Zeijen | Leiden University

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How do Americans grapple with the moral transgressions ingrained in their nation's history? A 2013 video game called *Bioshock Infinite* addresses this question. *Bioshock Infinite* was developed by Irrational Games and published by 2K Games as the third entry in the popular *Bioshock* series. The game takes place in Columbia, a fictional city-state that has seceded from the United States in *Bioshock's* alternate universe. Starting in 1912, the game follows the storyline of protagonist Booker DeWitt and takes its players through a number of historical events that have shaped the American past as they try to save a woman by the name of Elizabeth. Besides providing players with the opportunity to go on an adventure in a digital reality, *Bioshock Infinite* does something more. It highlights and exaggerates many troubling elements of US history and society, asking the player to confront the inequities in America's past and present. The game's director, Ken Levine, has acknowledged that *Bioshock Infinite* purposefully explores the theme of American exceptionalism, a set of beliefs about the United States' unique qualities and mission as a country.<sup>1</sup> It is this theme of exceptionalism in the game that is considered more closely in this paper.

The player is introduced to the issue of American exceptionalism early on in the game. A few hours into *Bioshock Infinite's* story, the protagonist enters a museum called the "Hall of Heroes," which celebrates and glorifies two events in American history: the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre (still called "The Battle of Wounded Knee" in the Hall of Heroes) and the striking down of the 1899-1901 Boxer Rebellion.<sup>2</sup> Rather than George Washington's crossing of the Delaware river or another typically celebrated scene, the events depicted here are nowadays - in "our universe" - considered to be problematic. The displays are centered around the supposedly heroic exploits of the game's antagonist, Zachary Comstock, as he is seen fighting off scores of American Indians and Chinese citizens, who are depicted as violent, barbaric savages.

Comstock is the founder and totalitarian ruler of the fictional city of Columbia, a floating steampunk metropolis in *Bioshock Infinite's* alternate universe. In the game's opening stages, the player learns that Columbia was launched into the sky at the 1893 Chicago World Fair as a proud symbol of American ingenuity, which would then travel all over the world so that everybody could admire its grandeur. Unbeknownst to the general public, however, Columbia was actually a warship-in-disguise that was used to intervene in the Boxer Rebellion in Beijing against the wishes of the McKinley administration, prompting the latter to recall the city from the skies. Comstock refused President McKinley's demand and instead chose to secede from the United States altogether, making Columbia disappear above the clouds. By the time Booker DeWitt arrives in Columbia in 1912, the independent city-state has been transformed into a violent, nativist police state. Comstock and the American Founding Fathers are revered as prophets, but stark racial and class divides make



a mockery of the ideals of liberty and justice. Booker's assignment is to save Comstock's daughter Elizabeth from the tower in which she is kept. During his mission, Booker is confronted by many of the unsanitary elements of Columbian history and society.

Perhaps owing to *Bioshock Infinite's* provocative content and commercial success, various scholars have analyzed the game since its release. Academics have paid attention to different aspects of the game, including nostalgia and dystopia, player agency and genre play, and the game's depiction of race.<sup>3</sup> The first two are discussed by Martin T. Buinicki, who argues that *Bioshock Infinite's* juxtaposition of fact and fiction contributes to its critique of American history. According to him, the game attempts to close the distance between the player and the game's protagonist, adding that the game's "numerous intersections with real events underscore its indictment of actual US history, and (...) the game's narrative ultimately forecloses any view of the past more hopeful than the fictional one it presents."<sup>4</sup> In another article, Betsy Brey explains how *Bioshock Infinite's* linear structure subverts the player's expectations about the agency and freedom of choice typical of the steampunk setting and of video games in general.<sup>5</sup> Brey understands steampunk as an artistic genre that emphasizes the possibilities and costs of the technological developments in the industrial era. Video games as a medium also tend to emphasize player agency and choice. She argues that *Bioshock Infinite* subverts these conventions by offering the player various choices which do nothing to alter the game's course of events. She points out that although the player's interpretation of the game's events and characters might be affected by these choices, the narrative itself is predetermined.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Diana Adesola Mafe has argued that *Bioshock Infinite* is a game that "breaks new ground in its representation of social prejudice, particularly racism, and its balance of gaming as entertainment with gaming as education."<sup>7</sup> According to Mafe, most American video games either tend to ignore questions about race, or to treat them only superficially. By contrast, *Bioshock Infinite* confronts these issues head-on.<sup>8</sup> In their own ways, all three studies explore how American society and history are critiqued in the game.

Considering the game's director's remarks about American exceptionalism as one of the key themes in *Bioshock Infinite*, it is noteworthy that none of these scholars have paid significant attention to the role of exceptionalism in the game. Therefore, this paper aims to add to the existing body of research by studying how *Bioshock Infinite* challenges notions of American exceptionalism in its portrayal of American society and history, and through the protagonist's identity and role in the game's plot. American exceptionalism has been defined by Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss as the idea that the United States is both unique and superior when compared to all other countries.<sup>9</sup> This broad definition encompasses a number of different beliefs about what it is exactly that makes America exceptional, many of which are discussed in the following paragraphs. Although some authors, including Edwards and Weiss, have attempted to codify exceptionalism as one or more coherent sets of beliefs, Siobhán McEvoy-Levy has accurately described it as a "para-ideology," a set of related ideas that nevertheless do not add up to one coherent ideology.<sup>10</sup> In this paper, I argue that *Bioshock Infinite* subverts the usual distinction between different strands of exceptionalist thought. Therefore, the broad definition offered by Edwards and Weiss is most relevant to this study.

Through analysis of the game's narrative and imagery, I argue that the game challenges traditional exceptionalist ideas in three distinct ways. The first section, "The Shining City Above the Clouds," explores how *Bioshock Infinite* presents a dystopian alternate version of American society.

Secondly, “Columbian Imperialism” lays out how the game undermines traditional views of American foreign policy. Thirdly, “Washed in the Blood of the Lamb” considers how *Bioshock Infinite* confronts players with the dangers of a self-righteous interpretation of American history. Finally, I argue that the game shows the difficulty of finding a more honest reappraisal of US history.

### The Shining City Above the Clouds

*Bioshock Infinite* starts with Booker DeWitt in a rowing boat that is kept on course by two mysterious figures. DeWitt is dropped off at a lighthouse with a note that reads: “Bring us the girl and wipe away the debt.” After getting to the top of the lighthouse, DeWitt sits down in a chair, which is then launched into the sky. Not much later, he arrives in the floating city of Columbia. DeWitt finds himself in a church-like gateway to the city, and the player is forced to undergo a baptism ritual in order to gain access. After having been dunked in the water repeatedly and losing consciousness, DeWitt awakens in Columbia’s “Garden of New Eden.” Here a group of devout pilgrims can be seen praying to a trio of enormous statues representing “Father Washington,” “Father Jefferson,” and “Father Franklin.” Already, the theme of American exceptionalism is clear in the language of the pilgrims’ prayers:

Male Pilgrim: *The Angel Columbia favored our Fathers with three gifts of gold.*

Female Pilgrim: *To Father Washington, she granted a sword of gold, so that Eden would have strength that set her above all other nations.*

Male Pilgrim 2: *To Father Franklin: a key of gold, so that Eden might have industry that set her above all other nations.*

Female Pilgrim: *To Father Jefferson: a scroll, so that Eden might have laws that set her above all other nations.*<sup>11</sup>

The religious attributes represent common elements in conceptions of American exceptionalism. The sword can be seen to represent the idea that the United States has a unique mission in world affairs, and is not subject to the inevitable decline faced by other great nations.<sup>12</sup> The key stands for the belief that America owes its prosperity to the ingenuity and work ethic of its people, perhaps best characterized by David M. Potter’s 1954 landmark study titled *People of Plenty*.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Jefferson’s scroll stands for the United States’ supposedly unique dedication to principle and the rule of law. “We are the first nation to be founded for the sake of an idea,” former president Obama was keen on telling audiences.<sup>14</sup> The idea that Americans are bound not by ethnic or historical ties but by their commitment to the values enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution is a hallmark of exceptionalist thought.<sup>15</sup>

It quickly becomes apparent, however, that the lofty ideals represented by the Founders are not reflected in the realities of the society in which Booker now finds himself. The city is rife with racist and xenophobic imagery and caricatures: there is an emphasis on racial purity exemplified by numerous symbols of a segregated society, including “Colored and Irish” bathrooms. These

elements of Columbian society could simply be explained by the game's taking place in 1912. However, there are multiple factors that prohibit players from discarding the horrors of Columbia as simply part of a fictional setting or a distant past. As Buinicki has pointed out, *Bioshock Infinite* uses numerous devices to “[shrink] the distance between the player and events.”<sup>16</sup> For one thing, the temporal remoteness of the game is complicated by the presence of various anachronistic elements, such as a barbershop quartet singing the Beach Boys’ “God Only Knows.”<sup>17</sup>

In-game, the presence of these elements is explained through the concept of “tears,” portal-like rifts in time and space that allow certain people and objects to see and step into different timelines and parallel universes. The concept of a “multiverse” of parallel timelines explains the word *Infinite* in the game's title. According to Buinicki, the game conjures up a nostalgic view of the American past through these anachronisms. So do the game's “Norman Rockwellesque” visuals, as Buinicki describes them, of an “idyllic turn-of-the-century city,” filled with picnicking couples and good-humored street vendors.<sup>18</sup> Buinicki argues that these nostalgic elements make Columbia's racial violence and class inequity all the more disturbing.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the protagonist Booker is revealed to be a former Pinkerton agent, involved in that agency's violent role in breaking up labor strikes. The character the player portrays is therefore not a blameless hero, but is instead complicit in Columbia's injustice. According to Buinicki, this fact also reduces the distance between the player and Columbian society.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the game features numerous references to vestiges of white supremacy still prevalent in parts of present-day America. The most notable is an organization called the Fraternal Order of the Raven. Its members are dressed in KKK-like robes and its headquarters features a large statue dedicated to John Wilkes Booth, thereby equating Columbia's secession from the United States to that of the Confederacy. As Buinicki points out, the point about the similarities between Columbia and the actual United States is expressed quite literally after Booker has successfully released Elizabeth, Comstock's daughter, from the sheltered tower in which she has been kept. Booker tells Elizabeth, who is shocked to see the displays of racial violence in Columbia, that “there's plenty of places down below where you'll find the same,” referring to the United States proper.<sup>21</sup>

Columbia is not only a racist society, but also features large economic divides and an increasingly militant underclass. The inequities in American capitalism are personified by the character of Jeremiah Fink, founder and president of Fink Manufacturing, Columbia's most prominent business. A larger-than-life symbol of worker exploitation, the player is forced to listen to a PA system that relays Fink's ideas during a visit to his factory:

*What is the most admirable creature on God's green earth? Why, it's the bee! Have you ever seen a bee on vacation? Have you ever seen a bee take a sick day? Well, my friends, the answer is no! So I say, be... the bee! Be the bee! (...)*

*Now, some say to me, “Fink, why is it we get paid in tokens that are only good at the company store?” Well, I'll tell you what: I'll be damned if I'd let any of you poor folk get robbed at some shady establishment. You see, the Fink company store brings you Fink products! At a price designed specifically for the Fink worker!#2*

Columbia's resistance movement, which encompasses both ethnic minorities and the city's economic underclass, is represented by the Vox Populi. This movement is led by a woman named Daisy Fitzroy, whom city officials condemn as an anarchist and who is falsely blamed by Zachary Comstock for his wife's death. But when Elizabeth encounters the city's underclass, she tells Booker: "These people are like this because of Fink? Maybe Daisy's right. Maybe she should pay him back for all of this."<sup>23</sup> In her article on *Bioshock Infinite's* depiction of race, Mafe has argued that "the game developers anchor [Fitzroy's] identity as a black woman in a discourse of empowerment and resistance."<sup>24</sup> However, the game refuses to give in to the temptation of moral clarity. Daisy Fitzroy is herself shown to be violent and brutal. At one point Booker and Elizabeth enter a parallel timeline in which a successful Vox Populi revolution has led to a "Robespierre-esque" reign of terror, as Mafe points out.<sup>25</sup> Mafe argues that the depiction of Fitzroy's own brutality challenges her capacity to serve as a symbol for social justice. Nevertheless, she concludes convincingly that a morally unambiguous portrayal of Fitzroy and the Vox Populi would not be consistent with *Bioshock Infinite's* intentionally murky presentation of right and wrong.

By the time the game was released in early 2013, the real world was barely a year removed from the height of the Occupy movement's activities in the United States. *Bioshock Infinite's* director denied that the Vox Populi were inspired by Occupy. He said that the in-game movement had been drawn up prior to the emergence of the real life one, and instead pointed to other historical resistance movements as inspiration.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the Occupy movement offers players another link between Columbia's society and their own world.

In the last few decades, numerous scholars have challenged common exceptionalist ideas by pointing out the inequities present in American society. Perhaps most famously, the influential sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset referred to exceptionalism as a "double-edged sword" in 1997. He argued that "many negative traits that currently characterize the society, such as income inequality, high crime rates, low levels of electoral participation, a powerful tendency to moralize which at times verges on intolerance toward political and ethnic minorities, are inherently linked to the norms and behavior of an open democratic society that appear so admirable."<sup>27</sup> Others have argued that even the elements of American life usually considered successful, such as the United States' economic prosperity, have less to do with the ingenious and industrious American character than with fortuitous circumstances and exploitative methods. For example, Godfrey Hodgson found that "American exceptionalism owes much to war, and specifically to the fact that in the twentieth century the American economy was twice left undamaged and indeed enriched by war, while all its potential competitors were transformed into pensioners."<sup>28</sup>

Like these scholars, *Bioshock Infinite* offers a critical account of the dark side of the American exceptionalist project. The Columbians' worship of the Founding Fathers is eerily reminiscent of mythological portrayals of Washington cum suis actual American society.<sup>29</sup> However, whereas the Founders represent justice, industry, and strength, *Bioshock Infinite* shows a fictionalized society characterized by injustice and exploitation, teetering on the brink of revolt. This fictionalized society turns out to have numerous parallels with actual American society, past and present. By portraying nostalgic scenes its twenty-first century audience would recognize and by casting players in the role of a former agent of the upper class, the game challenges players to

confront these issues head-on, rather than simply dismiss Columbian society out of hand. A somewhat similar dynamic is at play in the game's depiction of America's foreign policy history.

### Columbian Imperialism

By the time Booker and Elizabeth enter the Wounded Knee exhibit in Columbia's Hall of Heroes, the museum has been taken over by a veteran soldier named Cornelius Slate. Slate, who was once a Comstock supporter, now resents Columbia's leader for claiming a heroic role in the American efforts at Wounded Knee and in Columbia's intervention to strike down the Boxer Rebellion in Beijing. Using the museum's PA system, Slate tells Elizabeth that unlike Comstock, Booker did fight at Wounded Knee: "Your companion, young lady, he wrapped himself in glory on December 29, 1890."<sup>30</sup> When Elizabeth asks Booker for clarification, he answers: "You don't wanna know," to which the young woman replies: "You, you were there, at Wounded Knee. I can see it in your face." Slate then sends a group of fellow soldiers to attack Booker, arguing that they would prefer to be killed by a real soldier like Booker DeWitt than by Comstock's mechanized robot army that is tasked with defending Columbia. After Booker (i.e. the player) has killed the last of these soldiers, the following dialogue ensues:

Slate: *You did them a favor, Booker. You let them die like men.*

Booker: *I didn't ask for this! I have no quarrel with these men!*

Slate: *Heroes never ask.*

Booker: *I never claimed to be no hero.*

Slate: *Then what are you? If you take away all the parts of Booker DeWitt you tried to erase, what's left? Come back to the rotunda. It's almost over.*

Elizabeth: *What did Slate mean? What did you try to erase?*

Booker: *Now that you're out of yours, you might realize cages have their advantages.*

Elizabeth: *A choice is better than none, Mr. DeWitt. No matter what the outcome.*

Booker: *Yeah? What if you woke up one day and realized you didn't like what you chose?*<sup>31</sup>

The Hall of Heroes can be interpreted as a criticism of American exceptionalism. Traditionally, scholars distinguish between two distinct strands of exceptionalist ideas about America's role in the world. On the one hand, there is the view of the United States as an exemplary "city upon a hill," qualitatively distinct from the rest of the world, especially Europe, in its societal virtues and anti-imperial attitudes. This view is usually accompanied by an isolationist foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, there is the missionary conception of American exceptionalism in which the United States is perceived as the active "leader of the free world," with a unique mission to intervene in international affairs for the betterment of all.<sup>33</sup> It is usually argued that the missionary, interventionist vision has either supplanted the exemplary vision starting at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and culminating after World War II, or that the two have had alternating waves of popularity.<sup>34</sup>

The displays and events in the Hall of Heroes challenge the dichotomy between these two interpretations in multiple ways. In the first place, the game problematizes the strict distinction



between isolationism and interventionism. The city of Columbia seems at first to be a literal manifestation of the isolationist “city upon a hill,” removed from what its citizens refer to as “the Sodom below.” Columbia nevertheless goes on to violently strike down the Boxer Rebellion in Beijing less than a decade after being launched into the sky. Although in reality this intervention was enacted by a coalition of eight countries, including the United States, the game emphasizes the role America played by having Columbia end the rebellion on its own. In addition, the Hall of Heroes juxtaposes the Boxer Rebellion with the massacre at Wounded Knee. The political scientist Hilde Restad has argued that the United States was never truly isolationist, pointing to relatively little-known events such as the American participation in Beijing. She has also argued that the United States’ westward expansion, of which the Wounded Knee Massacre was a particularly violent episode, is mistakenly considered a domestic affair rather than an international one:

*Only by assuming that nineteenth century continental expansion was somehow part of domestic history, as opposed to acts of foreign policy, could U.S. foreign policy be characterized as isolationist until the 1890s, when the United States supposedly out of the blue experienced a period of imperial “aberration” contrary to its assumed nature as exceptionally peaceful and isolated.<sup>35</sup>*

The Hall of Heroes echoes Restad’s point about US westward expansion as an act of foreign policy, by juxtaposing the events at Wounded Knee with those in Beijing and pointing out the similarities. Indeed, even the racist imagery and language used in both displays is similar. In both cases, the enemies (American Indians and Chinese citizens respectively) are portrayed as violent and savage. A motorized statue in the Boxer Rebellion display tells Booker and Elizabeth that “’twas yellow skin and slanted eyes that did betray us with their lies. Until they crossed the righteous path of our Prophet’s holy wrath.” An identical statue in front of the Wounded Knee exhibit proclaims: “With hue and cry, with hatchet red, they danced amongst our noble dead. But when our soldiers took the field, the savage horde could only yield.”<sup>36</sup>

Besides drawing attention to America’s foreign intervention in Beijing and challenging players to see US westward expansion in a similar light, the displays also challenge the idea that America’s foreign interventions are always performed in good faith. As historian Trevor McCrisken points out, believers in the missionary vision of American exceptionalism have often argued that the United States “is incapable of seeking dominion over other peoples in its self-interest.”<sup>37</sup> The in-game museum displays make some effort to justify both interventions, arguing that America’s military actions at Wounded Knee were an act of self-defense and that Columbia acted in Beijing to retaliate for the killing of Americans in the rebellion. However, they also inadvertently convey the message that both incidents were fueled more by racism, wrath and self-interest than any sense of a beneficent mission. In any case, the exceptionalist language usually used to justify American interventionism is almost wholly absent here. Instead, both events are portrayed as a bloody struggle between civilization and barbarism.

Finally, just like Booker’s past as a Pinkerton agent complicates his and the player’s moral response to the struggle between Fink and Comstock and the Vox Populi, Booker’s actions at Wounded Knee also serve to remove the distance between the player and the events. Booker’s



regret over his past, as expressed in his conversation with Elizabeth, can be interpreted as a sign of “moral injury,” the severe psychological, emotional, and spiritual anguish experienced by individuals, particularly veterans, after having committed profound moral transgressions.<sup>38</sup> Through Booker, American players of *Bioshock Infinite* are confronted with the question of how to deal with the grotesque details of their own country’s history. This issue is amplified in the game’s final act, which features a shocking reveal about Booker’s identity and past.

### **Washed in the Blood of the Lamb**

In *Bioshock Infinite*’s later stages, the concept of multiple parallel universes, which are connected by “tears,” becomes increasingly significant. It is revealed that Booker and Comstock are, in fact, the same person. In a flashback scene set right after the massacre at Wounded Knee, we see Booker is about to be baptized. The preacher asks him if he wants to erase his sins and “be born again in the blood of the Lamb.”<sup>39</sup> In one universe, Booker refuses to undergo the baptism at the last moment, doubting whether “a dunk in the river’s gonna change the things that I’ve done.”<sup>40</sup> Ravaged by guilt and shame, Booker then turns to drinking and gambling. He is eventually coerced into selling his own baby daughter, Anna, to a pair of twins named Lutece to make up for his gambling debts. In another universe, Booker does undergo the baptism. After his sins have been erased, this reborn version of Booker adopts a new name for himself: Zachary Comstock. Comstock then founds the city of Columbia. On his orders, the Lutece twins use an experimental tearing device to bring Anna from Booker’s timeline into Comstock’s, where she is raised as Elizabeth. The twins later come to regret their decision and bring Booker into the Comstock timeline as well, setting the scene for the game’s events.

The revelation that Booker and Comstock are two versions of the same individual has important implications for interpretations of *Bioshock Infinite*’s message. Most important for the purpose of this study is the sharp divide in the way Booker deals with his shameful actions at Wounded Knee in the two main timelines. The existence of the city of Columbia, with all of its inequities and parallels to actual American society, is the direct result of one Booker’s decision to erase his past and forget (or ignore) the guilt and shame caused by his actions. This enables Booker, now Comstock, to create a cult of personality based on his own self-righteousness. When Cornelius Slate and the version of Booker who refused the baptism protest Comstock’s displays of his own glorious role at Wounded Knee in the Hall of Heroes and complain that Comstock was not even present at the battlefield, they are mistaken. They do not recognize that Comstock is simply another version of Booker himself who has decided to substitute glorification for shame.

From this, it becomes clear how we can view Booker as a symbol for the United States itself, and it becomes possible to interpret the game’s narrative as a warning about exceptionalist readings of America’s past. In defending the invasion of Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld famously said that America does not “do empire” and never has.<sup>41</sup> Rumsfeld’s remarks fit in a long tradition of similar statements by American politicians. President Wilson, perhaps most well-known for his significant efforts to expand American influence, categorically denied any allegations of the United States being guided by mere self-interest, let alone imperialism.<sup>42</sup> There are various other examples, both recent and old.<sup>43</sup> The game suggests that these classical interpretations of America’s past and foreign policy aims

are not just misguided, but dangerous. An unwillingness to acknowledge the sins of the past led Booker, and by extension the United States, into self-righteousness and dystopia.

Although the game points out that it is dangerous to adhere to an exceptionalist view of the United States to cope with the atrocities one is otherwise forced to confront, it still refuses to offer moral clarity about the alternative. Elizabeth uses her universe-traversing powers to take Booker back to the moment in which he is about to be baptized. Rather than refusing or accepting the baptism, Booker allows Elizabeth, who is joined by many of her manifestations from other timelines, to drown him. This deletes all of the Comstock timelines from existence. Although this is also the end of this version of Booker, a post-credits scene shows another Booker waking up in his office. A baby's scream can be heard, presumably by his daughter Anna. Because the Comstock timelines do not exist anymore, Booker cannot have sold Anna off to the Lutece twins. Before Booker can check whether his daughter is indeed in her room however, the screen cuts to black and the game ends.

While much of *Bioshock Infinite's* symbolism is quite explicit, occasionally bordering on the heavy-handed, this final scene resists easy interpretation. On the one hand, the destruction of the Comstock timelines symbolizes a possibility to make amends for the damage caused by America's self-righteous reading of its national history. Like Booker, Americans might come to a more honest understanding of their country's misdeeds, and perhaps be better for it. On the other hand, we know very little about this final incarnation of Booker: was he at Wounded Knee, did the massacre happen at all, and if so, how did he cope with his moral injury? The race forms and bottles on his desk suggest that this Booker also had reason to turn to gambling and drinking. The game thus seems to suggest that renouncing exceptionalism is necessary but also painful, and that alternative ways to confront American history and society are not easily found.

### Conclusion

*Bioshock Infinite's* most interesting contribution to the debate on American exceptionalism is the purpose it shows exceptionalism to serve. It allows Booker to reimagine himself as Comstock, transforming the former's guilt and moral injury into the latter's glory. The analogy is clear: a belief in the core tenets of exceptionalism allows Americans the opportunity to imagine a palatable version of US history and society, undisturbed by horrors such as the Wounded Knee Massacre. *Bioshock Infinite* demonstrates the dangers of such a sanctified view but also acknowledges the difficulty of a more honest reappraisal of US history and society: the version of Booker who does not forget his past sins turns to drinking and gambling as a result. Although Comstock has been defeated, the open-ended nature of the final scene thus denies the player the sense of an unambiguously happy ending. We do not know for sure whether Booker and Anna have truly been reunited, and it is not evident that Booker is doing a better job of taking care of himself. The player may have extinguished the danger of Columbia, but as Booker points out, "there's plenty of places down below where you'll find the same."

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Leigh Alexander, "Interview: *Bioshock Infinite*'s Strong Moments, Best Accidents," *Gamasutra*, last modified August 10, 2011, accessed June 3, 2018, [https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/36247/Interview\\_BioShock\\_Infinite\\_Strong\\_Moments\\_Best\\_Accidents.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/36247/Interview_BioShock_Infinite_Strong_Moments_Best_Accidents.php).
- <sup>2</sup> Ken Levine, *Bioshock Infinite* (Novato, CA: 2K Games, 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> Martin T. Buinicki, "Nostalgia and the Dystopia of History in 2K's *Bioshock Infinite*," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 4 (August 1, 2016): 722-737; Betsy Brey, "'A Choice Is Better than None, Mr. DeWitt. No Matter What the Outcome': Remix and Genre Play in *Bioshock Infinite*," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 7, no. 2/3 (2017): 104-112; Diana Adesola Mafe, "Race and the First-Person Shooter: Challenging the Video Gamer in *Bioshock Infinite*," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 30, no. 2 (2015): 89-123.
- <sup>4</sup> Buinicki, "Nostalgia and the Dystopia of History," 724.
- <sup>5</sup> Brey, "'A Choice Is Better than None,'" 106.
- <sup>6</sup> Mafe, "Race and the First-Person Shooter," 92.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism's Champions and Challengers," in *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, ed. Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, Kindle edition. (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2011), para. 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 23.
- <sup>11</sup> Ken Levine, *Bioshock Infinite* (Novato, CA: 2K Games, 2013).
- <sup>12</sup> Trevor McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 2; Edwards and Weiss, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism's Champions and Challengers," 1.
- <sup>13</sup> David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954).
- <sup>14</sup> Barack Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," *The American Presidency Project*, last modified January 25, 2011, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=88928>.
- <sup>15</sup> McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 7.
- <sup>16</sup> Buinicki, "Nostalgia and the Dystopia of History," 730.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 725.
- <sup>18</sup> Buinicki, "Nostalgia and the Dystopia of History," 724.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 724-725.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 730.
- <sup>22</sup> Patrick Summers, "*Bioshock Infinite* Game Script," *Neoseeker*, last modified April 4, 2014, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.neoseeker.com/bioshock-infinite/faqs/>.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Mafe, "Race and the First-Person Shooter," 109.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>26</sup> John Gaudiosi, "*Bioshock Infinite* Creator Ken Levine Talks 1999 Mode, *BioShock* Movie and Occupy Movements," *Forbes*, March 25, 2013, accessed June 3, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johngaudiosi/2013/03/25/bioshock-infinite-creator-ken-levine-talks-1999-mode-bioshock-movie-and-occupy-movements/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 13.
- <sup>28</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 29.
- <sup>29</sup> Buinicki, "Nostalgia and the Dystopia of History," 730.
- <sup>30</sup> Levine, *Bioshock Infinite*.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 2; See also Jason A. Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World: President Clinton's Foreign Policy Rhetoric* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).
- <sup>33</sup> McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 2.
- <sup>34</sup> Hilde Restad, *American Exceptionalism: An Idea That Made a Nation and Remade the World* (London: Routledge, 2014), 3.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.
- <sup>36</sup> Ken Levine, *Bioshock Infinite* (Novato, CA: 2K Games, 2013).
- <sup>37</sup> McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Summers, “*Bioshock Infinite* Game Script,” *Neoseeker*, last modified April 4, 2014, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.neoseeker.com/bioshock-infinite/faqs/>.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Rawson and Margaret Miner, *The Oxford Dictionary of American Quotations*, 2nd edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 271.

<sup>42</sup> Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> For a more recent example, see Hillary Clinton’s assertion in 2009 that allegations of American imperialism “do not reflect who we are.” Richard N. Haass and Hillary Clinton, “A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified July 15, 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton-1>.

## Densho:

# The Legacy of Japanese American Incarceration

**Marianne Kram** | University of Groningen

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in the BA program in American Studies*

On February 9, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a new command: Executive Order 9066. This executive order determined that Washington, Oregon, and California would become military areas in which Japanese Americans had to oblige to certain rules, such as mandatory registration, and curfews. The Japanese were the enemy in World War II and, thus, US officials believed that measures had to be taken against them at home. After a while, the order also forced Japanese Americans to relocate from their homes on the West Coast to internment camps in remote areas, such as the Arizona desert. In these internment camps, Japanese Americans practically became prisoners. What is remarkable here is that many of these people were native-born American citizens. What moved the government and military to do this? Was it constitutional to detain Japanese Americans? How did Japanese American citizens respond to the executive order? In this essay, I will argue that by analyzing the Constitution, the Supreme Court cases of Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu, and documents from the Commission of War Relocation, it becomes clear that the measures of Executive Order 9066 aimed at Japanese Americans during World War II were not based on military necessity or public safety, as was stated, but rather on paranoia and racism. In the first paragraph, I will analyze the Supreme Court cases of Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu and how their arguments apply to the constitution. After that, the focus will shift to the Commission of War relocation report, its findings, and General DeWitt's shortcomings. Lastly, the ex parte case by Mitsuye Endo will be discussed, which led to the closing of the internment camps. That paragraph will be followed by a conclusion.

In 1943 and 1944, Japanese American citizens Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu appealed cases to the Supreme Court to protest against Executive Order 9066, claiming it was unconstitutional and discriminatory. They had initially protested the executive order by deliberately refusing to obey the curfew and relocation. Both got arrested and prosecuted. In his case, Hirabayashi asserted that his rights as an American citizen were violated. He stated that he was discriminated against and did not receive his habeas corpus rights, meaning he was not equally protected.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Korematsu argued that his civil liberties were limited because his habeas corpus rights were not respected. In addition, they claimed the order was racist.<sup>2</sup> Analyzing the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights in particular, two amendments related to these cases and the executive order in particular: The Fifth Amendment and the Fourteenth Amendment. The Fourteenth states that “all persons born or naturalized in the United States [...] are citizens of the United States and of the States wherein they reside. [No] law shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens; nor [...] deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.”<sup>3</sup> Japanese Americans were not able to leave their houses between 8 PM and 6 AM and eventually had to leave their homes

entirely. The internment camps these Japanese American citizens were sent to were deficient. All the facilities were for communal use, leaving them no privacy.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the premises were guarded with watchtowers and barbed wire. As American citizens, they were, thus, deprived of their rights as stated in the Fourteenth Amendment. The Fifth Amendment is similar to the Fourteenth Amendment and states that: “no person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise, infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except [...] in time of War or public danger.”<sup>5</sup> Japanese Americans were incarcerated and had to sell their personal belongings, including property, in a matter of days. Again, the relocation and curfew violated their rights as American citizens because it deprived them of life, liberty, and property. The exceptions mentioned in the amendment, however, proved to be significant for the internment of Japanese Americans.

Both exceptions mentioned above, public danger and times of war, supported the Supreme Court’s decision in 1944 that Executive Order 9066 was constitutional. The exclusion of Japanese Americans was deemed a military necessity to make sure there could be no espionage or sabotage in the assigned military areas. Looking at the Constitution, Article I, Section 9, clause 2 states that “the Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it.”<sup>6</sup> Habeas corpus implies one has to be charged with a crime to be incarcerated; it is there to make sure every US citizen is equally protected against unlawful and biased incarceration. This should have meant that the incarceration of Japanese Americans was still unconstitutional. Public danger and time of war are, however, also mentioned as exceptions to Article I. Executive Order 9066 was presented in time of war, and the curfew and relocation of Japanese Americans were related to public danger, which can therefore rightfully support the claim that the executive order was constitutional. This shows the complexity of the constitution. Some officials claimed there was enough reason to utilize the executive order, deeming it a military necessity to relocate Japanese Americans as they were prone to sabotage or spying on the army. This turned out to be paranoia because most Japanese Americans subjected to the executive order were United States citizens and did not do anything to suggest that they would have been disloyal to the American flag.

After the war, governmental documents were released that revealed how the government, specifically had fabricated the reason for Japanese American internment because of cultural and racial prejudice. The evidence pointed specifically towards General John L. DeWitt, who had pressed for the order to President Roosevelt. In “Personal Justice Denied,” a report by the Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, it becomes clear that Executive Order 9066 could not be justified by the claim that it was necessary for military safety. There never was any serious threat for another attack or invasion. Some Japanese Americans did own guns, which were confiscated by the FBI, but they were not dangerous considering “any law-abiding civilian” could own these. According to the report by the Commission of Wartime Relocation, Japanese “social and cultural patterns were not evidence of any threat to West Coast military security.”<sup>7</sup> The FBI advised to only focus on suspicious individuals because there were no signs of a possible attack in California, Oregon, or Washington, which was also confirmed by the Army General Staff. Before the war, the United States already had a list of suspicious Japanese Americans who proved to be loyal to Japan. Instead of focusing on this list when implementing Executive Order 9066, General



DeWitt greatly exaggerated the military necessity of curfews and relocation. Additionally, to his advantage, DeWitt's report on the necessity of Japanese American relocation was never reviewed.

In fact, Eric Muller tells us in *Hirabayashi and the Invasion Evasion* that "top army and naval officials viewed a Japanese invasion of California, Oregon, or Washington as impractical in early 1942."<sup>8</sup> These evaluations were discussed and passed on to Congress as well as to Justice Department lawyers. Despite this knowledge, government officials still proceeded with the argument that invasion was a high threat. The Commission on Wartime Relocation states that these false claims regarding the military necessity of the curfew and incarceration seem to stem from "anti-Japanese agitation fed on racial stereotypes and fears: the 'yellow peril' of an unknown Asian culture," which was present far before the war.<sup>9</sup> States on the West Coast already had a few laws in place, which negatively targeted Japanese immigrants, such as the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement, Japanese immigration restrictions in 1908, and segregation of Japanese schoolchildren.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, by 1924 immigration was completely banned.<sup>11</sup> On top of that, immigrants could not obtain American citizenship, which, according to the Commission on Wartime Relocation report, was because of a feeling of competition.<sup>12</sup>

In a report about Japanese evacuation, General DeWitt claimed that "the Japanese race is an enemy race," which reflects on common racism towards Asians present at the time.<sup>13</sup> General DeWitt's claim is based on this same yellow peril agitation, attacking "a number of ethnic Japanese cultural traits or patterns which were woven into a bogus theory that the ethnic Japanese could not or would not assimilate or become 'American'."<sup>14</sup> In the aforementioned report, he claims that it is unsure whether Japanese Americans are loyal to the United States or Japan. DeWitt was convinced that loyalty was linked to ethnicity. Meanwhile, Japanese Americans were eager to assimilate into American culture. It could be said that they were model citizens, which led to jealousy amongst white Americans who were not as successful. The fact that Japanese Americans were so successful in American society shows their adaptation to the country's systems and culture. They achieved the 'American Dream,' a core value in American ideology and life. The fact that there were no signs of Japanese Americans sabotaging the army was "disturbing," according to DeWitt, because he believed that some sort of sabotage by Japanese Americans would occur eventually. Japanese Americans, however, had no intention to harm America. General DeWitt's statements and actions show he was, thus, prejudiced towards Japanese Americans.

Supreme Court attitudes towards Executive Order 9066 would change several years later in the successful *ex parte* case of Mitsuye Endo. Japanese American citizen Mitsuye Endo was relocated to an internment camp, despite being a loyal citizen who "was Christian, had never been to Japan, and could neither speak nor read Japanese."<sup>15</sup> Her lawyer filed for a writ of habeas corpus in 1944. Essentially, they were claiming the same thing as Korematsu and Hirabayashi did, but the focus in Endo's case was on loyalty to the United States rather than constitutionalism or racism. Endo and her lawyer were successful, which did not lead to the end of Executive Order 9066 but did result in the closing of the internment camps.<sup>16</sup> It was decided that the United States could no longer detain citizens who were "concededly loyal and law-abiding citizens."<sup>17</sup> This case had a big impact on Japanese Americans because they could now return home. Yet, according to the *Densho Encyclopedia*, which provides information on Japanese American stories in World War II, Endo's case did not challenge the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066 because of the focus on loyalty.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, Korematsu's case, which was decided on the same day, did challenge the constitutionality of the executive order, and he lost his case. Korematsu's loss suggested the executive order was still considered to be constitutional in the end. Regardless, later findings in the wartime relocation report would still prove to be unconstitutional. It shows that the evidence against Japanese Americans was fabricated, which overthrows the constitutionality.

In conclusion, Japanese American incarceration during World War II was ultimately unconstitutional and based on racial prejudice. Top officials fabricated the reason for relocation because yellow peril racism was deeply ingrained in American society and their government and military officials, such as General DeWitt. Eventually, the executive order would be seen as unconstitutional because there had been no military necessity behind it. It has caused suffering among Japanese Americans who had to start their lives over twice. Executive Order 9066 left behind a painful legacy, one that the Japanese have come to know as 'densho'.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Hirabayashi v. United States," *Oyez*, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://oyez.org/cases/1940-1955/320us81>.

<sup>2</sup> "Korematsu v. United States," *Oyez*, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1940-1955/323us214>.

<sup>3</sup> "Bill of Rights of the United States of America," *National Archives*, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>.

<sup>4</sup> "Japanese American Internment," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed January 29, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Japanese-American-internment>.

<sup>5</sup> "Bill of Rights of the United States of America," *National Archives*, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>.

<sup>6</sup> "The Constitution of the United States of America," *National Archives*, accessed December 11, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.

<sup>7</sup> *Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*, "Personal Justice Denied," December, 1982, <https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied>.

<sup>8</sup> Eric L. Muller, "Hirabayashi and the Invasion Evasion," *North Carolina Law Review* 88, no. 4 (May 2010): 1333-1388.

<sup>9</sup> *Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*, "Personal Justice Denied," December, 1982, <https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*, "Personal Justice Denied," December, 1982, <https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> "Ex parte Mitsuye Endo (1944)," *Densho Encyclopedia*, accessed January 27, 2020, [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Ex\\_parte\\_Mitsuye\\_Endo\\_\(1944\)/#Supreme\\_Court\\_Case](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Ex_parte_Mitsuye_Endo_(1944)/#Supreme_Court_Case).

<sup>16</sup> "Ex parte Mitsuye Endo (1994)."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> "Ex parte Mitsuye Endo (1994)."

## Two Versions of the Till Lynching:

### A Comparative Approach to *The Chicago Defender* and the *St. Louis Argus*

Lucy Strange | Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

*This paper was written for the course The United States South 1800-1970 in the BA program Sociology with Study Abroad at the University of Exeter*

The lynching of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, in the summer of 1955 tapped into the deepest sense of injustice among the African American community, having catalytic consequences for the Civil Rights Movement. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy from Chicago. Whilst visiting relatives in Mississippi, he was accused of flirting with a white female shop assistant. Till, from a Northern state, was unaware of the social conventions regarding interracial relationships put in place by Southern society.<sup>1</sup> This accusation warranted enough evidence for two white men to become lynching vigilantes against Till, leaving his face “disfigured beyond recognition.”<sup>2</sup> Historian Maurice Berger describes how they found Till after the lynching: “His swollen tongue hung out of his mouth (...) his left eye was missing (...). A large, gaping bullet hole pierced his temple.”<sup>3</sup> Lynchings had been used from the Reconstruction period onwards as a form of domestic terrorism against African Americans, often with little to no evidence for minor crimes or deviating from societal norms. The social and political climate of 1955 in the United States was tense; the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum as African Americans challenged their “separate but equal” status in society. In 1954, one year before the lynching of Emmett Till, *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruled segregation in schools to be unconstitutional, yet the Jim Crow laws and norms in the South continued to marginalize and segregate based on racial grounds. This paper will analyze the contrast between the social climate of the North, which Till was accustomed to and where African Americans had a more liberated way of life, and that of the Jim Crow South.<sup>4</sup>

The Emmett Till case was covered in various African American newspapers in order to keep the African American community informed about racially motivated acts of terrorism, whilst also serving “as a safety-valve for the boiling negro protest,” as sociologist John H. Burma writes.<sup>5</sup> African American newspapers were crucial for distribution of information in the community, as demonstrated by a study from the 1940s which found that 94% of African Americans in Chicago read an African American paper, and 65% read two or more.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, newspapers also held authority and influence over social control and racial solidarity, as the press was largely divided along racial lines. During the Great Migration, the African American press took responsibility for informing newly arriving black migrants on the social climate of a new city. *The Chicago Defender*, for instance, published a weekly column of public “dos” and “don’ts” in order to keep individuals in line with what was expected of them in a new environment, discouraging acts such as listening to jazz music.<sup>7</sup> Such geographical and social variables existed within the scope of African American newspapers, and so, dependent on the newspaper, these variables can help us understand different narratives of the same events.

This paper aims to explore the diversity of such newspaper coverage by studying how the content of two newspapers, *The Chicago Defender* and the *St. Louis Argus*, provide different narratives about the Emmett Till lynching case. Both papers were long-established weekly

publications, having a historically African American readership. *The Chicago Defender*, in print since 1905, was considered a national newspaper, whereas the *St. Louis Argus*, published from 1912, was regional. Yet, both were deemed reliable sources of information for the African American community. *The Chicago Defender* was published in Till's hometown of Chicago, Illinois, which was once considered a free Northern state, while the *St. Louis Argus* was published in St. Louis, Missouri, a Southern state where the historical consequences of plantation slavery were still visible in daily life. Money, Mississippi, where Till was killed, is a six-hour drive south of St. Louis, meaning that the *St. Louis Argus* reported the incident from relatively nearby. Both Money and St. Louis are culturally and historically considered part of the 'Deep South.' This contrast between Chicago and St. Louis should be emphasized because the policies and social climate of the previous hundred years had left the groundwork for the political environments of the two regions.

These newspapers were selected based on value-judgments about their content regarding the lynching of Emmett Till. I will compare the two newspapers to find relevant information about attitudes towards Emmett Till, differences between Southern and Northern contexts, and attitudes of the black community. These themes form the basis for the analysis and structure of this essay. For each chosen theme, I will include three corresponding newspaper items from each paper. The sub-questions considered to answer the key question are: What are the consequences of the case for the black community readership? How do the two newspapers differ in terms of their readership demographic? Does the difference in location of the two publications impact the content of the newspaper? The main question will be approached broadly, encapsulating the complete content of the selected newspaper scans to analyze the reception and effects of the articles, and the layout and photographs that may appear in the papers. Yet, throughout this essay, it must be taken into consideration that reception can be subjective and that meanings can only be interpreted and implied. The act of 'reading between the lines' becomes a fundamental theme throughout the qualitative analysis and interpretation of the source collection.

Emmett Till was murdered on August 28, 1955, but the first reports of his case did not appear in *The Chicago Defender* or the *St. Louis Argus* until September that year, on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> respectively. On the front page of *The Chicago Defender*, its headlines read "Blood On Their Hands" and "Nation Shocked, Vow Action in Lynching of Chicago Youth."<sup>8</sup> According to media scholar Beth Johnson, such headlines intended the reader to feel large scale outrage through the use of imagery: "Sensationalistic headlines, graphic images, and red ink were utilized to capture the reader's attention and convey the horrors of lynchings," she writes.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the articles portrayed an emotive and driven view of the case to an African American community that felt disheartened and unmotivated upon reading about the case. Encouragement lied in forceful and proactive verbs like 'promise,' 'urge,' and 'vow action,' which created a climate of sympathy and alignment among the African American readership. In other words, the initial response from *The Chicago Defender* likely took into consideration the thoughts and feelings of a black community that wanted justice for a lost member of their community, as Till was from Chicago and his acquaintances would have been reading the newspaper.

Whereas Till was presented as a youthful and innocent 'martyr' in *The Chicago Defender*, the *St. Louis Argus's* initial response to the Till case was more reserved.<sup>10</sup> Rather than in the North, where there was a shocked response, the subheading of the *St. Louis Argus* simply read: "Two Men Held On Inditement."<sup>11</sup> Although its headlines concerning his case provided the most eye-drawing account on the page, even displacing the newspaper's logo, the coverage was not as all-encompassing

as it was in *The Chicago Defender*. Moreover, the lack of photos of the Till case in the *St. Louis Argus* sharply contrasted with *The Chicago Defender* coverage of September 10th, where reports were accompanied by three relevant photographs. The more passive response by the *St. Louis Argus* could be explained by the fact that despite the Till lynching being horrific, lynching was a more normalized part of the Deep South's history. In Cook County, which includes the city of Chicago, only one lynching was reported in 1919, with 56 occurring in the whole state, compared to 60 in Missouri and 654 lynchings in Mississippi in the period of 1877-1950.<sup>12</sup> This could explain why the attitude of *The Chicago Defender* was much more sensitive. Besides, its initial coverage was also more extensive than that of the St. Louis newspaper, which could be representative of the outrage felt among his friends and family, especially because of these statistics. In addition, *The Chicago Defender* also had a wider audience and may have wanted to be an early condemner of the offender in order to save face among its readership throughout the trial.

The *St. Louis Argus*'s response to the Till case continued to be distinctly different from the response of *The Chicago Defender*. This difference in attitudes reflects on the differences in Southern and Northern contexts which can, for example, be seen clearly in the phrasing of the headlines. On 30<sup>th</sup> September 1955, the *St. Louis Argus* headline reads: "Scenes from Sumner, Mississippi, Where Two Went Free In Kidnap-Murder; Congressman Digs, Victim's Mother In Bazarre Dixies Town."<sup>13</sup> This headline is factual and free from emotion, introducing the coverage of events in two towns: Sumner, Mississippi, where the trial of the Till case took place, and in Money, Mississippi, here referred to as "Bazarre Dixies Town," the place where Till had been lynched.<sup>14</sup> The notion of calling Money a "Bazarre Dixies town" shows how the small town was viewed by reporters in St. Louis. Money was known as an area where deep racial hatred towards African Americans was already prevalent long before Emmett Till visited. Even in comparison to the rest of the Deep South, the number of lynchings in Leflore County, where Money is located, was disproportionately higher in this county compared to the rest of the Deep South.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, the next day *The Chicago Defender* wrote: "Here's A Picture of Emmett Till Painted By Those Who Knew Him," positioned front and center in the newspaper.<sup>16</sup> It located the experience of Till in the hands of those who were closest to him, creating a more realistic image of the boy throughout the funeral process, acting to restore a sense of trust and community between the readership and newspaper. It was important for the narrative of Till to be positive and personal, rather than being misconstrued by journalists, so that the African American community of Chicago was able to mourn properly. The narratives that black journalists and Mamie Till were "a searing and seemingly irrefutable visual testimony to the history of racialized violence in the US."<sup>17</sup> The piece was positioned next to the Metropolitan Funeral Parlors advert.<sup>18</sup> Strikingly different, it had a sobering effect, acting to connect the portrait of Emmett Till's innocent life to the tragic reality of his death. There are hints of progressiveness in the paper as the small article says, "End Jim Crow Public Housing in Capital" beneath the main headline.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, when it came to the description of the town where Till was killed, *The Chicago Defender* proved to be more distant than *the St. Louis Argus*. The headline of one Till article read: "Till Lynching Displaces Cotton, Jim Crow As Top Topic In Delta" with the Mississippi Delta being known as the "the most Southern place on Earth."<sup>20</sup> The way *The Chicago Defender* referred to the geographical location of Money, Mississippi, was more factual, 'Delta', in comparison to the 'Sleepy town' and 'Bazarre Dixie Town' of the *St. Louis Argus*, as analyzed in the previous paragraph. This difference could be explained by the actual social and physical distance of *The Chicago Defender*. With this distance between Chicago and 'Dixie land' *The Defender* seemed to be able to be more



objective in terms of regional prejudice. News coverage thus did not only reflect on the African American community's relation to Emmett Till as a lynching victim, but also regional biases towards the geographical location of the case. The differences in the newspapers can be traced back to the contexts in which they are written in, and therefore take into account their readership and how they approach the death of Till.

Newspaper coverage changed as the case advanced from a small local issue to the beginning of a nationwide social movement. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1955, the *St. Louis Argus* dedicated a whole page to nine large photographs of large gatherings of African Americans, captioned with the headline: "Stark Drama Descends Upon Otherwise Sleepy Town In Lynching Case."<sup>21</sup> The contrast between 'Stark Drama' and 'Sleepy Town' reflected the shock of the lynching enveloping the town, ominously predicting how the events would eventually make way for the Civil Rights Movement. One of these photographs illustrated a crowded courtroom scene, in which the murder trial of Emmett Till was being held. This was the first time the paper published an image depicting the community grieving. Another photo showed a portrait of the disfigured, unrecognizable post-mortem face of Emmett Till, contrasted with a picture of Emmett with his mother, both smiling and smartly dressed. The contrast between these photos was staggering, and the careful positioning of the two evoked passion and outrage among the readership, juxtaposing his youthfulness against the barbarity of the crime. The image of his disfigured face was published at the will of Mamie Till, alongside her wish for an open casket funeral. With her permission, the image was circulated among black publications, including *Jet Magazine*. This enabled African Americans, on a national scale, the ability to mourn, grieve, and pay respects to Till, who consequently became a symbol of defiance and an early martyr for the Civil Rights Movement. Amy Abugo Ongiri describes how "Rosa Parks would later write that it was of Emmett Till she was thinking when she performed her famous refusal to give up her seat to a white bus passenger, an action that sparked the Montgomery bus boycott," a pivotal event in the development of the national movement.<sup>22</sup>

Altogether, *The Chicago Defender* and *St. Louis Argus* had subtly different narratives on the Emmett Till case. Despite being similar publications in age, production, and reader demographic, the narratives depended on the history of the papers' audiences. These different styles of reporting result from their geographical and social proximities to the event. *The Chicago Defender* was more widely read, enabling it to have a larger potential audience to impact. Additionally, the readers of *The Defender* had a closer social proximity to Emmett Till, as he was from Chicago. After all, in a 1988 interview Mamie Bradley even "expressed her appreciation of *The Chicago Defender*, a prominent black newspaper, for its extensive coverage of her son's murder and the trial."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the *St. Louis Argus* was geographically closer to the place where the case occurred and where the court trial took place. In their coverage of the case, regional biases towards Money, Mississippi, were much more prevalent. Both newspapers thus engaged with the lynching of Emmett Till by looking at the case through their own lens. Although the newspapers were written far apart, the case was close to home for both, whether emotionally or geographically.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Sherman, “The Emmett Till Generation: The Birmingham Children’s Crusade and the Renewed Civil Rights Movement,” Master’s Thesis, Salve Regina University, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Randolph Oby, “Black Press Coverage of the Emmet Till Lynching as a Catalyst to the Civil Rights Movement,” Master’s thesis, Georgia State University, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> John T. Burma, “An Analysis of the Present Negro Press,” *Social Forces*, no. 26 (1947):172-180.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Carrie Teresa, “The Jim Crow-era Black press: Of and for its readership,” *Organisation of American Historians*, 2019. <https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2018/august/the-jim-crow-era-black-press-of-and-for-its-readership/>

<sup>8</sup> “Nation Shocked, Vow Action in Lynching of Chicago Youth,” *The Chicago Defender*, 10 September 1955, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Beth Johnson, “Binga Bank and the Development of the Black Metropolis,” in *Racial Structure & Racial Politics in the African Diaspora*, edited by James Conyers (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 7.

<sup>10</sup> “Nation Shocked,” 1.

<sup>11</sup> “40,000 At Till Youth’s Funeral: Two Men Held On Murder Indictment,” *The St Louis Argus*, 9 September 1955, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching In America: Confronting The Legacy Of Racial Terror: County Data Supplement,” *Equal Justice Initiative*. Last Modified February 2020. <https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/lynching-in-america-third-edition-summary.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> “Scenes from Summer, Mississippi Where Two Went Free In Kidnap: Murder; Congressman Digs, Victim’s Mother In Bazarre Dixie Town,” *The St Louis Argus*, 30 September 1955, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Equal Justice Initiative. “Lynching In America: Confronting The Legacy Of Racial Terror: County Data Supplement.” Equal Justice Initiative. Last Modified February 2020. Accessed December 9<sup>th</sup> 2019. <https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/lynching-in-america-third-edition-summary.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> John Barrow, “Here’s a Picture Of Emmett Till Painted by Those Who Knew Him,” *Chicago Defender*, 1 October 1955, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Amy Abugo Ongiri, “I am Trayvon Martin”: Visual Culture, Trauma, and the Incarceration Crisis,” *At Close Range: The Curious Case of Trayvon Martin*, University of Florida, Levin College of Law. 2013. Annual Spring Lecture.

<sup>18</sup> Barrow, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> “Stark Drama Descends Upon Otherwise Sleepy Town In Lynching Case,” *The St Louis Argus*, 23 September 1955, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Abugo Ongiri, Amy. “I am Trayvon Martin”: Visual Culture, Trauma, and the Incarceration Crisis.” *At Close Range: The Curious Case of Trayvon Martin*. University of Florida, Levin College of Law. 2013. Annual Spring Lecture.

<sup>23</sup> Oby.

## Book Review

### *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War*

Joanne B. Freeman (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018)

Paul Brennan | Roosevelt Institute for American Studies / Leiden University

*This book review was written independently for the Netherlands American Studies Review during Paul's PhD in American Studies*

American politics may seem rough now with its deep partisan divide, inflammatory rhetoric, and gridlocked Congress. There was, however, a time when physical violence was endemic to American politics. A time when, for example, a full-scale brawl involving roughly thirty members of Congress was only one, granted extreme, example of a regularly occurring phenomenon. Such acts of violence are the topic of Yale historian Joanne B. Freeman's recent book: *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War* (2018).

In *The Field of Blood*, Freeman lays to rest any remaining notions one might have about the antebellum Congress being an august body of statesmen that would gather to eloquently debate the issues of the day. Instead, Freeman replaces this commonly held image of Congress with a lively portrait of a seething, booze-filled environment in which the threat and reality of violence was always present. Most people interested in the pre-Civil War period know of the brutal caning of abolitionist Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate in 1856. Yet Freeman has managed to show that this was merely a particularly extreme episode in an environment where Congressmen, like Henry Foote and Galusha Grow, were better known, and even celebrated, for their fighting prowess than for their legislative and oratory abilities. Freeman uncovered evidence of these otherwise neglected violent incidents by cross-referencing the Congressional records (which often only alluded to such incidents euphemistically) against the diaries and correspondence accounts of participants and witnesses. Through these means, Freeman has managed to account for seventy more violent episodes that involved fisticuffs, the drawing of fire-arms, dueling, and stabbings.

With this new evidence in hand, Freeman constructs an account of Congress that acts as both a microcosm of and a contributor to the increasingly irreconcilable sectional conflict about the issue of slavery. Freeman shows how, in the early years, the Southern members of Congress were the prime instigators of violence, often relying on intimidation to achieve their political goals. As the issue of slavery divided the country, a new group of Northern representatives emerged, promising that they would confront any aggression with violence of their own, if need be. Consequently, even greater violence ensued in the remaining years just prior to the Civil War.

*The Field of Blood* proves itself to be a valuable, engaging, guiltily entertaining, and insightful reappraisal of Congress, American politics, and political culture in the antebellum period. It is a reminder that, despite the importance of the formal political process, politics has been, and can still be, literally a bloody enterprise.

## Book Review

### *The Global Gag Rule and Women's Reproductive Health: Rhetoric versus Reality*

Yana van der Meulen Rodgers (Oxford University Press, 2018)

Tom Meinderts | Leiden University

*This book review was written independently for the Netherlands American Studies Review in preparation for Tom's MA thesis in International Relations*

Yana van der Meulen Rodgers's latest work, *The Global Gag Rule: Reproductive Health in the Age of Trump* (2018), is a systematic analysis of the effect of the Global Gag Rule on women's reproductive health in the developing world. The Global Gag Rule, formally known as the Mexico City Policy, was first instated by President Reagan in 1984 and bans US foreign aid to family planning NGO's that perform, provide information about, or advocate for abortion. A highly partisan policy, the Global Gag Rule was expanded under President Trump to remove funding from NGO's for their family planning budget and for health care in general, if their organization does not cease to perform or inform about abortions. As US foreign aid constitutes billions of dollars in health programs, the cuts in funding for these vital healthcare services are likely to impact global health. Besides the policy's impact on reproductive health and general healthcare, Rodgers specifically cites funding for epidemics such as Tuberculosis, the Ebola virus, and the Zika virus as at-risk under the expanded gag rule.

Overall, Rodgers's mixed-methods approach provides an interdisciplinary perspective on the impact of the Global Gag Rule on women's reproductive health. The first half of the book constitutes a qualitative analysis of the political origin and background of this policy in its different iterations. It also contains an overview of the existing research on the effects of the Global Gag Rule and the evolution of US family planning assistance. The second half of the book provides a quantitative approach that builds upon previous statistical research from the Bush-era to its present iteration. This section examines the correlation between contraceptive access and fertility rates, the legal implications and restrictions of the Global Gag Rule, and its impact on abortion rates in developing countries. By taking this interdisciplinary approach, Rodgers effectively argues that the Global Gag Rule did not only fail to decrease abortion rates but likely increased them.

*The Global Gag Rule* is a welcome addition to the scarce literature on the impact of this policy. Despite the massive effect of the Global Gag Rule on women's reproductive health, this is one of the few extensive studies on the topic, especially regarding the impact in the Trump-era. As such, Rodgers's study on the impact of the Global Gag Rule is an invaluable tool for policymakers concerned with women's reproductive health in the age of Trump.

## Book Review

### *Our Selfish Tax Laws: Toward Tax Reform that Mirrors our Better Selves*

Anthony C. Infanti (MIT Press, 2018)

Shu-Chien Chen | Erasmus University Rotterdam

*This book review was written independently for the Netherlands American Studies Review during a PhD at the Erasmus School of Law (ESL)*

In *Our Selfish Tax Laws: Toward Tax Reform That Mirrors Our Better Selves*, Anthony C. Infanti considers how US federal tax laws reflect the self-image that American people have of themselves and of their society. Infanti's main argument is that law and society mirror each other. For tax law this means that it is not merely a "pocket issue" about money, though mainstream tax scholars so presume.

Infanti first observes two conflicting and counter-intuitive trends: today, Americans are becoming less willing to pay tax (though most of them still recognize tax as civic obligation), whereas the amount of money donated to charities has achieved the highest record ever. Americans generally have a negative attitude toward tax.

Infanti further observes that current USA federal income tax laws reinforce the "privilege" of a specific group in American society. This privileged group refers to a heterosexual, cisgender, married man, with a stay-at-home wife and children; he is a physically and mentally able, wealthy, U.S. citizen." Infanti refers to this group as "self," enjoying more benefits than "others" who are outside this privileged group. He illustrates this by an example in Chapter 4: an LGBT family is not entitled to deduct the same expenditures from their tax return as a traditional family.

This bias to the privileged group in US federal income tax laws is "selfish," according to Infanti. Such selfishness is contrary to how many Americans regard their own society and values: being inclusive and embracing diversity. Therefore, Infanti argues that tax reform should strive for "mirroring better selves," not "mirroring wealthier ourselves." By challenging some widely accepted assumptions, such as "greedy taxpayers always wanting to reduce their tax burden as much as possible," Infanti argues that American taxpayers should choose a different attitude toward tax and tax reform. Consequentially, Infanti asserts in the final chapter that the Trump Administration's 2017 tax reform project focusing on reducing tax paid by the wealthy is not on the right track.

The book is insightful because it does not limit tax reform to being an economic issue. Instead, Infanti emphasizes that taxpayers' attitudes towards taxes are the real key to fair tax reform. His writing style adds to this by using, as an American himself, the narrative "we", persuading fellow Americans to change their stance on taxes and to embrace an attitude of "better selves." Therewith, this book conveys a universal lesson for non-American readers as well, encouraging them to reflect on any tax reform.

